LANGRISHE, P.

THE
LONG WALK OUT

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By

P. J. D. LANGRISHE.

A walk through Italy September to November 1943

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Summary
by J.K.K.
facing Page 1

7.1.94

March Stages.

Place.	Appx mileage.
Vigoleno.	12
Trinita.	5
Pozzolo.	7
Villora.	6
Pieve de Bardi.	9
Prato della Femmina.	5
Bedonia.	7
Borgotaro.	10
Beltorte.	12
Roccaterrara.	14
Ruzzano.	18
Vologno.	12
Cassano.	15
Niviano.	15
Riola.	18
Sparvo.	18
Nr Barberino.	15
Vicchio.	20
Mori.	15
Rassina.	25
Sovara.	20
S. Secondo.	22
Nr Umbertide.	20
Assisi.	21
Trevi.	16
Scheggino.	18
Tripozzo.	15
Fano.	15
Santi.	16
Casamaina.	22
Secenaro.	21
Castroralva.	20
S. Lorenzo.	18
Across the Sangro.	25

34 day stages — appx: 530 miles.

'The Long Walk Out' P.J.D.Langrishe Officer Artillery.
In Desert from June 1940. In and out of Greece and Crete. In support of 50th Div Captured in 150 Brig. Box . Ends in PG at Montalbo - Fortress 20 miles SW of Piacenza Moved to Fontanellato. A new orphanage of four stories. Chapel used as assembly room. PL is appointed cartographer of the Camp(the account is the only one to have full maps of complete journey while PL was always requesting and often finding other maps in journey).
9th September 1943 all were marched out with cooperation of Italians and SBO shortly before the Germans came. The G's did not follow up but ate the meal and drank the wine prepared for the POWs lunch. Soon broke up into small groups. PL with others stayed for a week at farm only 3 miles from camp. (An officer in another house nearby, who spoke good Italian, showed the Germans round the house where he was staying to prove that no Englishman was being hidden there.) PL moves off by himself and then four of them decide to make for Bardi in the hills to the South. At the small village of Pieve di Bardi with only 20 house they are greeted in cockney English. (Area noted for much emigration to England.) PL and his colleagues tended to go into smaller villages but avoided the bigger ones. Good descriptions of the remoter small communities where life had hardly changes in hundreds of years but which in 2 decades would disappear. The detail given by PL of food and 'billeting arrangements' shows the wide variety of reception given to them - though almost always very warm but depending on the conditions of each family. In the northern peaks of the Appenines they were welcomed often for their novelty value as well as the usual humanitarianism of the Italians but later on, especially after skirting Florence they were disconcerted to find their motley clothes instead of making them melt into the landscape they were reocgnised by the contadini who had seen many others pass by. Having travelled most of the way with one companion some Italians asked them to take along a Spaniard. After a day or two, as more and more Germans were around they decided each to go on his own. Near Aquila heard two 'incredible' stories. One that a Wellington had been brought in to take off a group of POWs and the other that a platoon of S.A. parachutist hd landed to help POWs. Met a party of Australians not very energetically making for the front.
Having crossed the Rome Pescara road and rail near Cocculo they meet up with others who are going to be led through the lines by an Italian (See also Fox's Spaghetti & Barbed Wire' and later over Sangro John Verney 'Going to the Wars'). Among the party others from Fontanellato. When they set off there are some 20 Allied POWs and some 60 Italians - some carrying suitcases. It was now past the middle of November and at times, even in pouring rain PL with or without companions had done 20 miles a day up hill and and down very many valleys with an unknown and very varied meal at the end of the day with luck, very seldom a hot meal midday and - much to his chagrin no breakfast at all. He had no water proof clothing but was one of the few with good english boots.
The guide led off with the Allied 20 behind in small groups (as they would make less noise) and then the Italians. At one point when on Monte Greco the guide doubled back as Germans were below and said he would have to lead by the tail around another way. PL had been joined by 4 others from Fontanellato and a Sergeant picked up on the way when all the party had spent the night ina partly destroyed and empty village. After guide was lost PL and others lead the way crossed - with care-German telephone line and nearly mat German gunners, goes off to the right but some of the followers disturb Germans and there is machine gun fire behind them. PL, using the fires burning in Alfadena and Castel di Sangro as guides finds the well used (by others) area across or rather through the Sangro and the flat and partly wooded country in the area. Others, one with socks instead of shoes can't make the last lap so PL and American go forward and bump into American forces. The others come through later in the day.
PL gets home in England on 23rd December 1943.
The wealth of description of the differing reception and hospitality and the agonies caused by the mountainous routes it was necessary to take and the cruelties of the weather and conditions at times are all very well brought out.

34 day stages. approx 530 miles (But what terrain)

J. K. K. 24. 1. 94

INTRODUCTION.

Every story must start somewhere and it will help the reader if some light is shed upon how I found myself in Campo P.G.49 at Fontanellato in Northern Italy in the year 1943 before I set out upon what subsequently became the longest walk in my life.

In June 1942 I had been for rather more than two years a proud member of 25/26 Battery of 7th Medium Regiment Royal Artillery then serving with the 8th Army in N. Africa. We were equipped with modern long-range equipment, 4.5" guns and our regiment was one of the seven regular Medium Artillery Regiments of the British Army. We had been participants in the earliest desert battles from June 1940 onwards, the famous battle of Sidi Barrani in December 1940 and the subsequent battles of Bardia, Tobruk and the advance to Benghasi and beyond. Thence we had battled up and down Greece, from there to Crete where, as infantry, we took on the German Airborne Army at Heraklion - escaping, thanks to the Royal Navy, back to Egypt but suffering terrible casualties from bombing en route.

Re-equipped, since we had had to blow up our guns on the slopes of Mount Parnassus, with the new 4.5" gun, we took the field again in the Western Desert in Operation Crusader, to relieve besieged Tobruk as its main objective. For many days, as had been told in other books, the armoured battle raged and swayed back and forth around Sidi Rezegh until eventually the Axis army under Rommel was driven out of Libya, the Regiment finding itself at El Agheila on the Gulf of Sirte, at the very sharp end of the British Army.

As is well known, Rommel recoiled in January 1942 and the Regiment amongst others found its way, after some hair-raising experiences, to the fortified "Gazala line" about 20 miles west of Tobruk in March where it stayed, digging in behind miles of barbed wire and millions of mines, in support of the 50th (Tyne and Tees) Division of 30 Corps. But, in May 1942, the enemy struck. A week or more of bitter fighting found 25/26 Battery penned in an ever-shrinking perimeter in support of 150 Infantry Brigade but on 1st June 1942 the end came to the Brigade Group and, despite a final ferocious Stuka attack on the Battery, the guns were destroyed with the last two rounds of ammunition. This melancholy exercise is effected by placing one shell, wrong way round, in the muzzle of the gun then loading another round in the usual way and firing the gun with a (very) long lanyard. Then so far as possible all other military equipment was smashed into uselessness and, finally, the Battery safe was buried in a slit trench with a substantial amount of money locked inside.

CHAPTER 1.

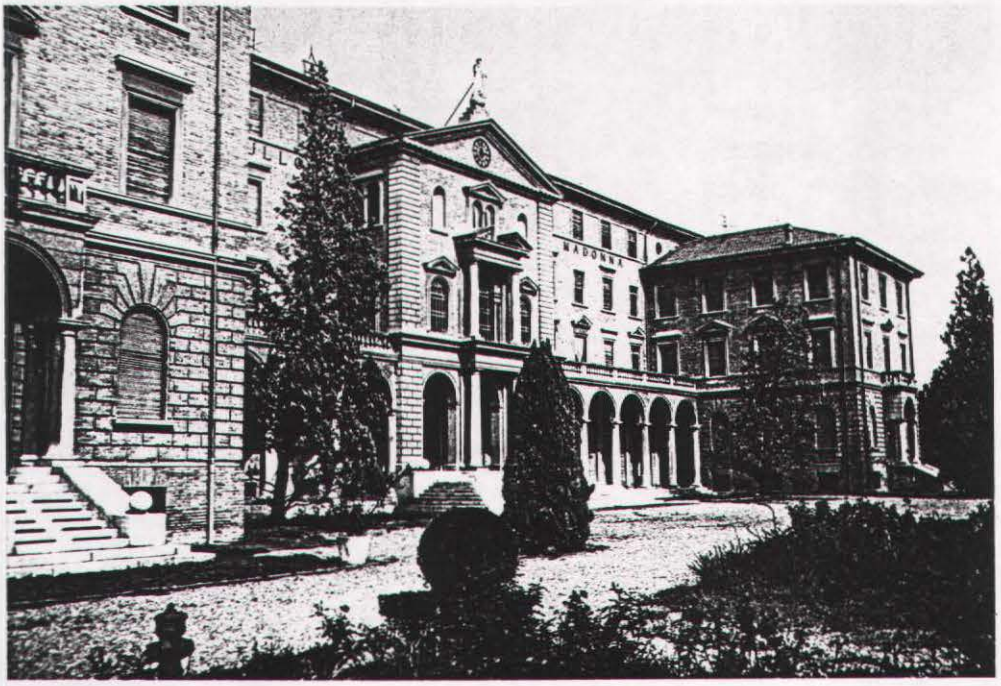
After that the long trip into captivity began but it was not until about September 1942 that I finally reached my first permanent POW Camp. This was at Montalbo a small village up in the Appenines about 20 miles or so South West of Piacenza in N. Italy. It was a smaller edition of the famous, or infamous, German camp at Colditz - a small mediaeval castle built on a hill top in the form of a hollow circle on three floors which housed about a hundred officers mostly British and a smaller number of other rank orderlies.

During the winter of 1942-43 life rolled slowly past but the dull round of POW life was brightened by the effects of the ever-growing volume of the R.A.F. heavy bomber raids on Milan and Genoa. We could hear the massive Stirling bombers droning overhead on their way to or from Genoa also the equally massive thuds and shaking of the earth as the huge bombs rained down. We could on fine nights see splendid pyrotechnic displays from Milan and in the Italian newspapers there were strong complaints of "unfairness" on the part of R.A.F. bomber crews who, after dropping their bomb load, descended to a low level to strafe buildings, streets and ground targets with machine-guns before heading for home. Indeed it might be said that the Italians or at least the government-inspired press and radio regarded it as both unsporting and unreasonable that their country should be subjected to bombing from U.K. bases or at all.

It was also during this Winter that our Italian captors began to hint that we were soon going to be moved to a marvellous new camp where every comfort known to man would be at our disposal subject only to the trifling inconvenience of incarceration until the Axis duly won the War but, living from day to day and distrusting all rumour, we prisoners took it all with handfuls of salt. It was all good fun but not untypical of POW experiences generally.

Spring of 1943 came down into the Plain and soon there was blossom everywhere, reminding us of the orchards of England and those who were waiting there at home for us. There were days of great beauty to be fully appreciated by those upon whose hands time hung; there was the mighty chain of the Alps running in a half-circle from the west to the north-east, a chain of snow-clad giants, sparkling in the clear morning sunshine. There was the mighty massif of Mont Blanc, poised in mid-air on a cushion of misty blue above the Plain; further to the north could be seen the great shoulders of Monte Rosa beyond which lay Switzerland, a land of freedom, and all its shimmering brethren in their ice-clad majesty.

Shortly before our move actually took place, the Italians played what they presumably imagined was their ace. Almost without any prior warning



Campo P.G. 49 at Fontanellato - 1989.

The Plaque affixed to the gatepost in 1983 on the 40th anniversary of the Armistizio recording the help given to the English and Allied prisoners immediately thereafter.

our small force of other-rank batmen was spirited away and in their place came a similar number of white South African troops. Doubtless the Italian High Command hoped by this means to introduce considerable friction in the camp, not to mention the possibility that South Africans with such names as Muller could be persuaded to form a fifth column within our camp.

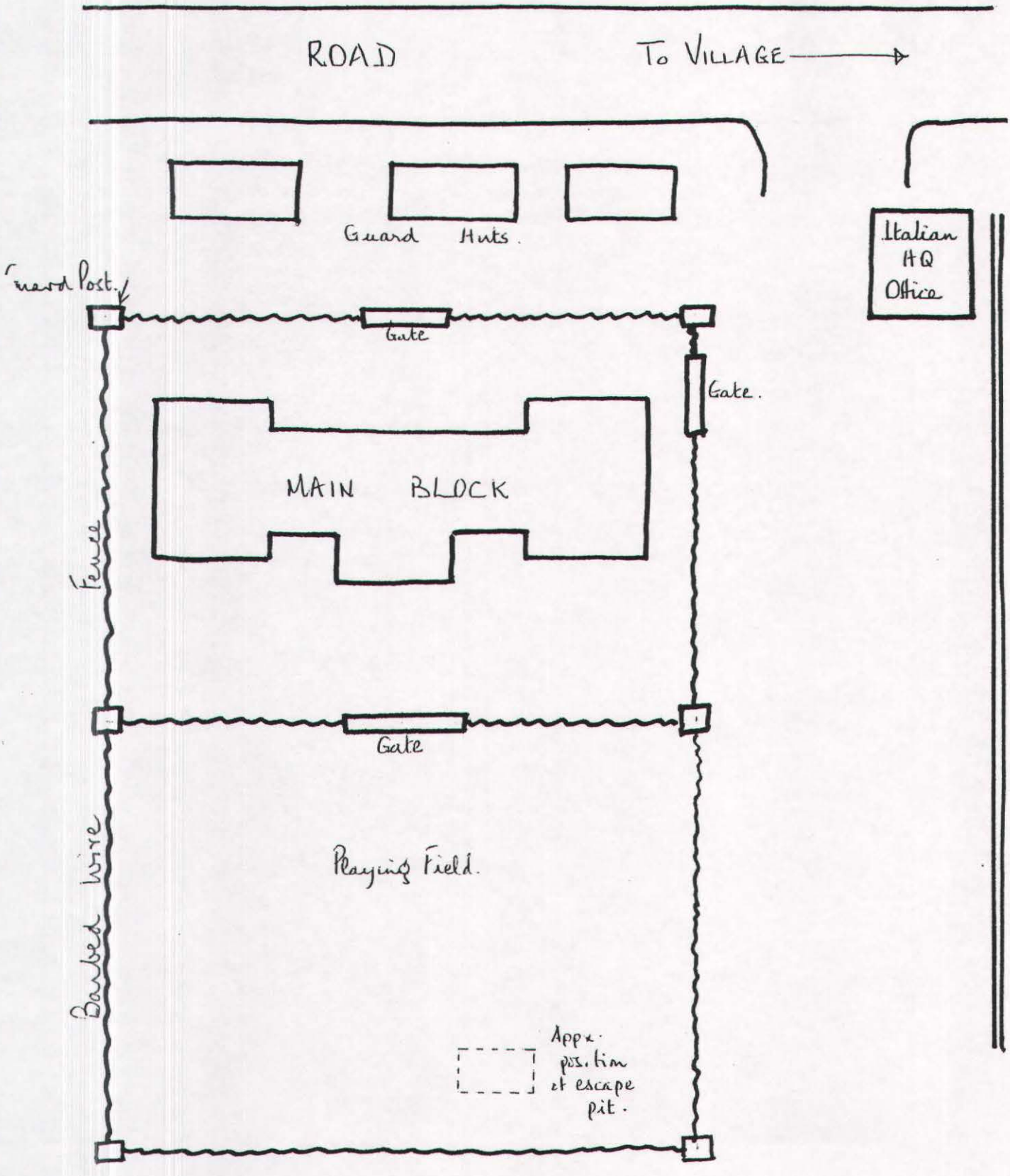
Our S.B.O. (Senior British Officer) immediately took the matter in hand, explaining the position as he saw it to the South Africans who thereafter to a man took it all in good part no doubt to the great disappointment of the Italians. More South African's joined us later after our move to the new camp.

Finally the rumours became more certain and, wonder of wonders, one day the order came through. We were to move lock, stock and barrel to this new wonder-camp. Preparations were put in hand for there was much to be seen to. As to the meagre possessions of the inmates, these presented no difficulty but there was the large quantity of unissued Red Cross parcels and the stores of private food to be conveyed to our new lodging. All, however, was dealt with and then came the great day.

Suddenly, it all began to happen. We were told to pack our few miserable possessions, we were paraded for the usual POW searches at the hands of our captors for contraband goods and at dead of night we marched out of our mini-Colditz into a couple of large coaches, each with a passenger-carrying trailer and in these we trundled through the night to Piacenza where a train was boarded. This took us to a station in the middle of nowhere on a hot afternoon. Here we detrained and, weary, hot and dispirited we had to march the couple of miles to our promised paradise. From the name on the station we gathered we had arrived at Fontanellato - Campo P.G. 49 in military parlance.

Speculation grew with every step. One voice said the camp was in huts, another that it was another castle till finally we came in sight of a huge new brick-built edifice. It was so impressive and modern that nobody considered for a moment that this was our destination till the head of the column turned into the gateway. We had arrived!

Now the Italian talent for wasting time and putting to inconvenience those in a less fortunate position was brought fully into play. Without semblance of any military form, some two hundred weary POW's milled about in front of the impressive structure finally sinking to rest on the steps of the granite podium on which the building stood, to await events whilst the shadows lengthened and our stomachs indicated their lack of food since we had left Montalbo. No one seemed to know what was to be done and when, after more than an hour's time utterly wasted, a bugle began to sound and signs of martial activity were seen in the guards' compound, we found ourselves


ROAD
To VILLAGE
Guard Huts.
Guard Post.
Italian HQ Office
Gate
Gate.
MAIN BLOCK
Fence
Gate
Barbed wire
Playing Field.
Approx. position of escape pit.

spectators of the striking of the flag. Those who were weary from the long march from the station remained on their bottoms and were rebuked by the Italian Commandant who told them to respect, outwardly at least, another nation's ceremonial even if they did not agree with it and in any case, to be good enough not to laugh! From past experience we knew that at some time the Italians would (or should) search us for POW contraband, i.e. items of use for escape purposes but as time wore on and darkness fell in the end the expected search was dispensed with till the morrow. What the Italians would expect to find after we had been given a night in which to conceal those things they hoped to unearth, no one can say but we were grateful for such mercies, small as they were.

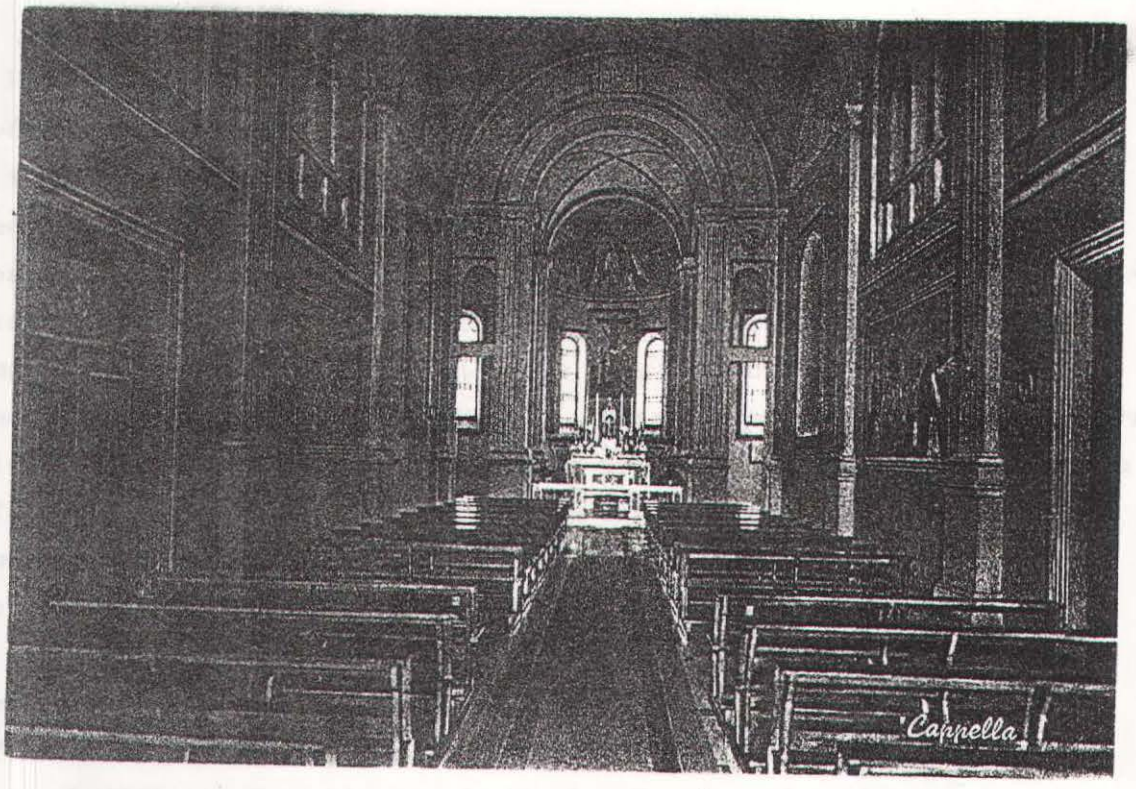
The building in which we found ourselves was originally built as an orphanage and, in fact, we were the first occupants; history does not relate what happened to those for whom it was intended but no doubt the news was received in discerning circles in the same spirit as was the news here of German prisoners of war travelling to the exclusion of our own people in English trains.

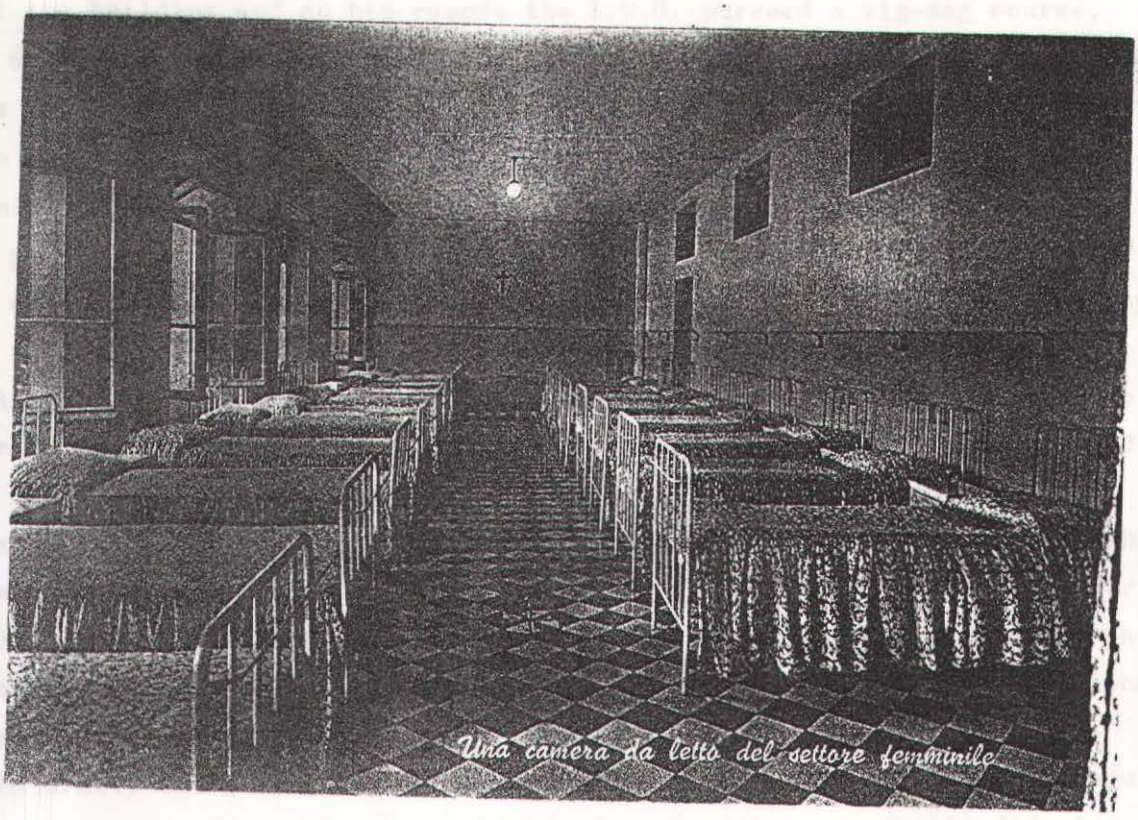
The orphanage was a most imposing edifice, built in rather florid style but bearing a slight resemblance to the front view of our own Buckingham Palace. It had three floors and a large central hall which would have been the Chapel but for our purposes was used as a meeting hall and games room, usually harbouring serried ranks of bridge fours during the evenings. It was light and airy though we were fairly packed into the rooms used as dormitories. Washing and sanitary facilities were impressive to look at but shoddy and rather unreliable in use.

Throughout the next week or so, at intervals more parties of POWs would arrive from other camps until the full complement of approximately 600 officers, mostly British but a sprinkling of various Allied contingents as well was reached. All then settled down again to POW routine including the cat which had been brought from Montalbo on a lead, to the amazement of the Italians.

As the Camp began to find its feet, various incidents would take place. For instance, the Italians were having some bother connecting up our main water supply and to finish the work, a large van equipped with all sorts of tools came in to the compound. It left eventually with considerably fewer tools than when it entered. We were also permitted to work on the levelling of our games field which was sited in a separate compound at the rear of the building for which purpose we were issued daily with a number of picks and shovels.

The Camp Escape Committee saw in this the embryo of an idea for a break-out. It must be explained that investigation within the camp soon revealed the impossibility of a tunnel because the level of ground water in





Campo P.G. 49 - Fontanellato.

These copies of Italian postcards (c. 1950) show the interior of the building. (Upper) - the Chapel. In 1943 it contained no religious furniture but was the general assembly room for the POWs - usually an animated scene of bridge fours! (Lower) - a typical bedroom but as POWs we had no bedspreads! Otherwise little change.

the Po River valley was only a few feet below the surface. So, under cover of out-door tuition classes in the games compound, a hole was dug large enough to take two persons with a modest amount of escape gear. This was situated near the outer perimeter wire and as every evening it was covered with boards which had been smuggled out with loose earth on top, it escaped detection because, after dark with the camp searchlights focussed on the building, the games compound was bathed in inky blackness.

When all was ready the breaks began. Over the next ten nights ten pairs of officer POW's took their departure quite unnoticed by the Italians through the efficiency of the cover plan. Twice a day we were paraded in the games compound for roll-call, an affair which usually took at least twenty minutes and the steadily increasing numbers of absentees were camouflaged by a simple plan.

Before each roll-call the Italian Orderly Officer was given a nominal roll of those sick in bed,by rooms. There were two staircases, one at each end of the building and on his rounds the I.O.O. pursued a zig-zag course, along one floor, up the stairs to the next, along the next then up the other stairs and so on. Those detailed to be "sick" were checked in one room then ran up by the other staircase to the floor above, where they climbed into pre-determined beds, and in this way the Italians were completely fooled. The cover plan was maintained for about a week after the last pair had left and then, one fine summer morning the deception was lifted. The Italians simply could not believe their eyes, twenty short of total strength!

As well as being counted and re-counted umpteen times we finally had to answer to our names so that, at the end of the day, our captors knew who had gone. From what was learned later, proverbially all hell was let loose throughout Northern Italy which must have caused major disruption amongst the police and military forces. Alas no one made it to freedom though one pair were only caught right on the Swiss frontier near Como and one of another pair who had the Italian name of Roncoroni caused the temporary arrest of all local Roncoronis for miles around!

Naturally the games compound was placed out of bounds while our captors tried to find the menas of escape which, of course they eventually did when an Italian soldier in the search party walked into the hole. Some hours of light relief followed when a body of gilded representatives from the Staff made an appearance and a number of photographs of the means of escape taken with one of the oldest cameras ever seen, namely a small trench near the further wire from which over a period two at a time had made their successful breaks. An Italian soldier was sent to sit in the hole and several exposures made from different angles to the accompaniment of loud jeers and cheers from the windows of the orphanage. Such was the Wooden Horse of Fontanellato.

The daily round varied little. Beneath a generally typically blue Italian summer sky we lived out our routine life. Most days a formal walk was allowed for about 60 at a time. For these we donned our smartest kit and always kept a spanking pace along the local country roads where our route took us and it was not unusual for a walk to return to camp with only the Italian Orderly Officer and the Carabiniere sergeant, the military escort having fallen by the roadside being unable to keep up with us - we were on parole not to make escape attempts on walks. These walks took place soon after sunrise because of the hot weather, before breakfast.

During the daylight hours there were classes held in every available corner for instruction in several languages, law, accountancy and many other subjects. Lunch was our main meal and, having regard to the severe Italian rationing, it was, remarkably, sufficient mainly because we were fortunate in having our catering supervised by an absolute expert in that field. Also our supply of Red Cross parcels was operated on a centralised basis instead of being issued individually as was more general practice elsewhere and this arrangement provided a massive supply of canned and dried groceries for various meals.

And so the summer wore on. Rugby football and soccer were played furiously throughout the tropic heat of the day to the amused interest of our guards who regarded this as proof, if proof were needed, of the proverbial madness of the English. The war news for the Italians grew blacker and yet blacker till it became apparent that their days as an Axis ally were numbered. We lived from day to day for the news. Our guards began quite openly to talk of going home and seeing our families again. Times were stirring, great things happening.

Suddenly, sensation! The afternoon of 25th July was electric, radios outside the camp blared and without any warning a small crowd came streaming down from the village shouting and dancing in the street - "Mussolini has fallen, Mussolini has fallen". The pathetic Italian soldier guards, C3 to a man, poured out of their huts tearing portraits of Il Duce from the walls and jumping on them with their boots. Indeed these were by no means the worst indignities to which the pictures were subjected!

Mussolini had fallen and, strangely, the millions of Italians who recently appeared to worship the ground on which he walked, now reviled him and cursed him to perdition as the man who had ruined his country - which in truth he had done by electing to tie it to Hitler's coat tails.

And now a strange thing happened. It fell to my turn to be one of those due to go on an outside walk the very next day after this momentous event. The early morning air was fresh and the sky a marvellous blue with promise of heat as we marched out of the compound and on to the road through the village. As We progressed at our usual smart pace but with an added spring in our step we

could not help but notice a quite extraordinary visual change to the whole landscape. We suddenly realised that virtually every representation of the hated emblem, the fasces - the bundle of rods - had been blotted out overnight from kilometre posts, house-number plaques, public buildings and elsewhere and such slogans as "Long live the King" appeared in their place.

In a few days - but after some hard fighting - Sicily has fallen and British shells are actually falling on the homeland as the Italian government announces preparations and measures for defending the fatherland and repelling the hated invaders. Pictures appeared in the papers of "the armoured train", a pathetic collection of antique railway ironmongery featuring a large but almost prehistoric cannon, which was being sent to the toe of Italy to guard the coast against landings; it could not have lasted more than a few hours from the attentions of the R.A.F., if indeed it ever reached a war zone.

Another strange thing happened. One day, out of the blue, that much respected newspaper the Corriere della Sera appeared with the front page and much of the second also, covered with a most fulsome paean of praise for "La Ottava Armata" - the British 8th Army, describing its victories and defeats but holding it up as an example of perfect military conduct and behaviour, clearly a step in preparing the Italian people for a change of side in the war. When it actually arrived on Italian soil, the people could rely on the British Army to regard them as friends again. All the more extraordinary was this because only shortly before the papers had been reviling "the barbarous Anglo-Saxon" fliers who had been dropping bombs on their sacred soil.

Further sensations came hot upon each others heels - now the Allies were ashore on the mainland near Reggio di Calabria and we, behind our barbed wire, begin to envisage freedom within a matter of days. Being at that time the official unofficial cartographer, I had prepared large maps of Italy to shew the progress of the mainland invasion and of the Russian fronts which were displayed on the wall of our "hall", something we would never have dared to do a week or two previously as they would have been immediately removed and confiscated by the Italians.

One small worry, however, clouded our otherwise encouraging outlook - how would the German Army react? After all, we were sitting in our camp in the Po valley some 500 miles at least away from the then front line. Not only that but we had seen German infantry marching about on our road past the Camp and rumours of a whole division encamped in the neighbourhood for training. We would not have long to wait.

CHAPTER 2.

SURRENDER

What we had been hoping for and expecting day by day came, somewhat unexpectedly, in the evening of the 8th September. I had come back to my room after supper and was chatting with two or three others when the serenity of the summer evening was shattered by a growing hubbub from the direction of the village. We went to the windows and soon were astonished to see a large crowd of the villagers, joined by our guards, come hurrying down the road, some on bicycles and some on foot, shouting, singing, cheering and throwing their caps in the air; "Peace, peace", they cried, suiting the action to the words. The soldiers flung down their rifles, jumping on them and called out to us that we were now their friends.

Our first reaction was perhaps one of numbness. Here was the thing we had all been waiting for and what were we to do? Were we free to leave the camp, would our troops be with us in the morning, how would we be sent home? These and a hundred other like questions sprang into our minds until, through the chatter of excited conversation came the order that the Senior British Officer would address all ranks in the main hall immediately.

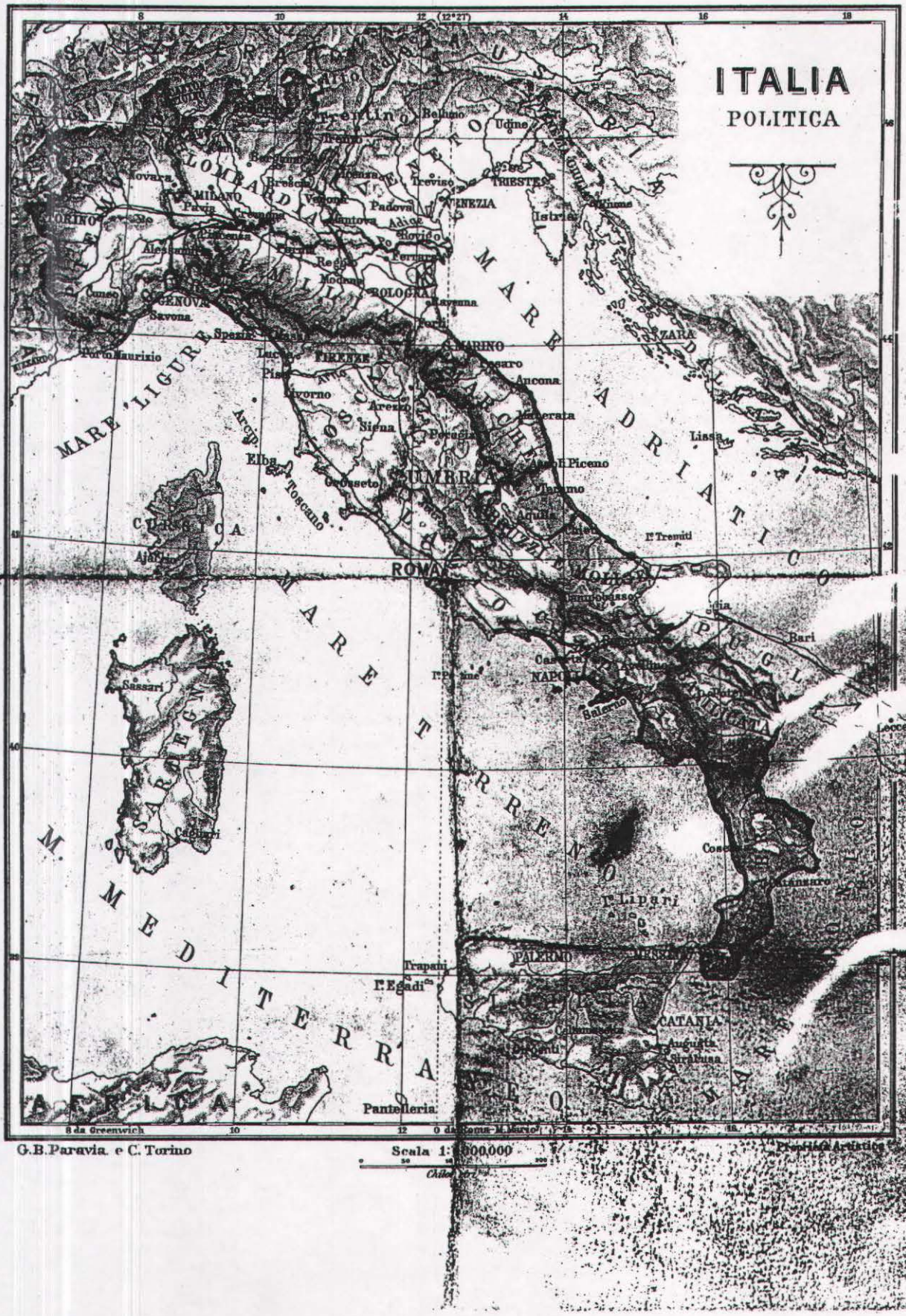
The crowd of some five hundred excited prisoners thronged into the hall and then we heard the S.B.O. make his announcement. It was indeed true that the Italian Government had surrendered unconditionally to the Allies and that therefore we should, in the normal course of events, expect to be speedily repatriated. He explained that all ranks must remain in camp till further orders and that the Italian Commandant had made arrangements with him for the speedy evacuation of the camp if it became necessary but until he gave the order, no one would leave. He wound up by saying that unless any emergency arose in the meanwhile, nothing further would take place until 9 a.m. the following morning when another full parade would be held.

We all then retired to our various rooms where every sort of discussion ranged back and forth upon the situation and speculation as to the future course of events. It was confidently assumed that there would soon be Allied landings in the Gulf of Genoa, mainly in order that the large number of prisoner of war camps in the Plain should be released, it being borne in mind that there must have been nearly fifty thousand prisoners spread over quite a small area. But alas, how wrong were these estimates!

At dawn the Italian guards on the gates were replaced by our own "police" and after breakfast, all ranks fell in for the muster parade. It was a great occasion, our first parade at which no Italians had been present. The S.B.O. gave out his orders in the shortest possible time. Immediately after the parade all ranks were to don battle-dress, collect one day's hard rations and then be ready to evacuate the camp on five minutes notice on the sounding

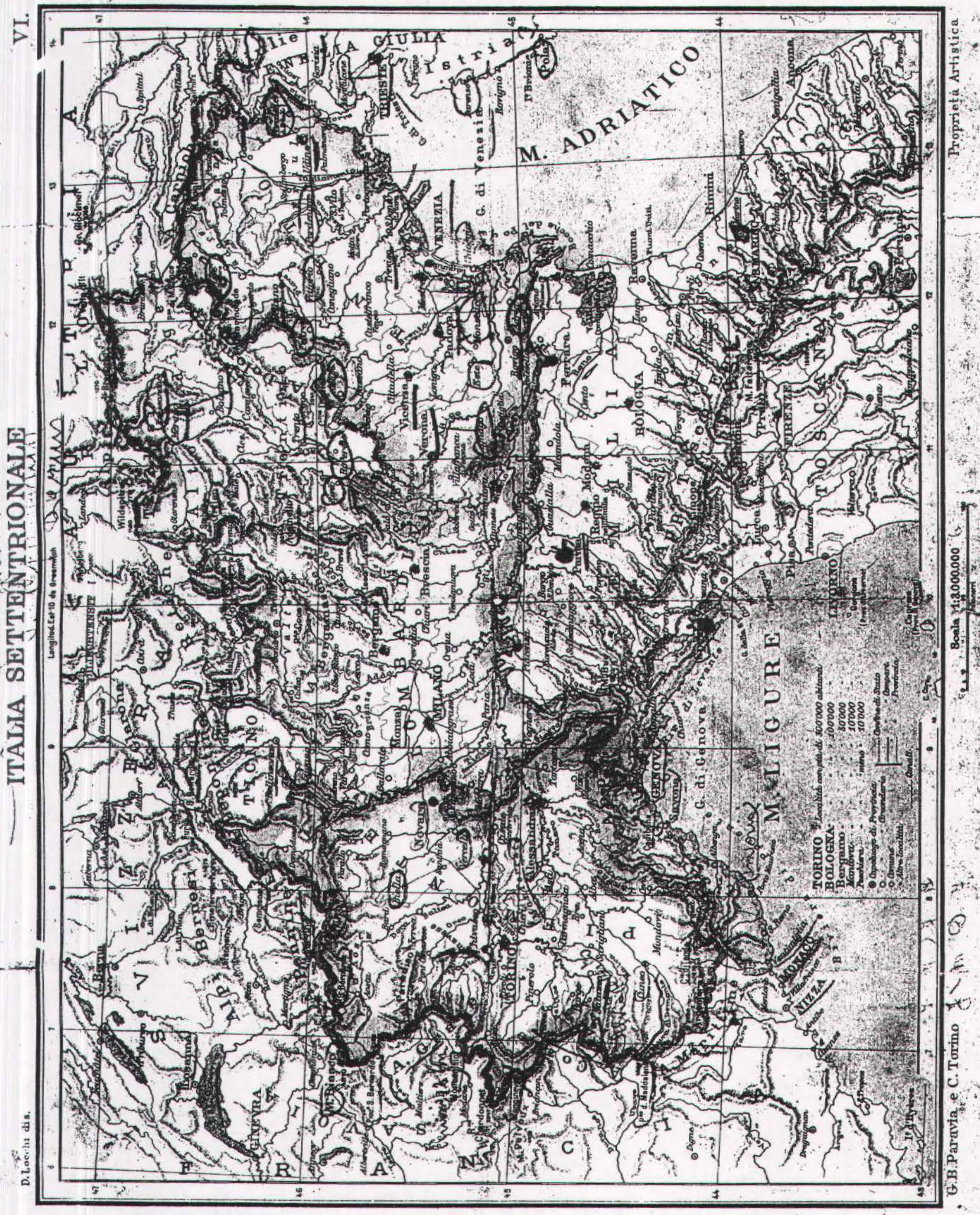
Tav. 5.

V.



G.B. Paravia e C. Torino

Tav. 6.



THE MAP WITH WHICH I NAVIGATED DOWN ITALY.

of a bugle, borrowed from the Italians. Further orders would be announced later.

This was all soon done. We all made our rooms tidy and parcelled up and packed away those things we would have to leave behind in case they could be recovered at a later date. This done, small knots of people formed, exchanging addresses and giving messages for those at home in case of trouble on the way. Somehow it seemed unreal that after all these long months, in many cases years, the great day had come and we would once more be going forth free men into the outer world; unreal that the tables were turned, that we were now the bosses and the Italians dancing to our tune; unreal that this large and ugly building for so long our home from home, was now a place to be left behind as soon as possible.

Our thoughts also turned to those at home. What had they been told and what did they expect us to be doing? In the events that were to follow, it turned out that their hopes were to be sorely tried but just then we felt some of the happiness that they must have been feeling and we tried to picture to ourselves our homes and friends in England.

Eleven o'clock was the signal for the usual mid-morning drink; we foregathered in the stony courtyard in the rear of the building to receive our cocoa and the discussions were adjourned to be further considered over steaming mugs. Suddenly there was a roar of aeroplane engines and a pair of black ugly German JU.88 bombers were to be seen streaking for the camp at low altitude over the fields. We thought this was the beginning of some sort of attack for the Germans knew well where we were and we could not believe that they would let the chance of collecting several hundred British officer prisoners slip through their fingers. However all was well and the planes passed safely overhead. We then noticed that the Italians had cut away a long stretch of the wire at the end of the playing field - freedom began to seem very sweet and near and beckoning.

Cocoa consumed, most departed back to their own or to friends' rooms and word went round that the Italian commandant had given orders to the guard that, in the event of any German attempt to recapture us, they would defend the camp to the last man or at any rate until we had made our escape. This did not inspire any great confidence in us but in the present state of tension, it shewed that he was on our side.

Mid-day had hardly sounded from our clock and it was nearly time for our lunch when those who were in the rooms in the front of the building heard a cry they were to hear often in the days to follow. The Italian guards who were lounging about in and out of the guard-huts took up the cry "Tedeschi vengono, the Germans are coming, escape quickly." I never knew whether our bugle sounded or not but the desired effect was achieved with speed and

efficiency. Whilst gathering together my few belongings which I had put aside for this moment, I saw through the window the Italians putting into effect their promise to hold the camp. It seemed that a small party of Germans had been seen some miles away and the rumour grew with repetition till I believe the Italians thought they were going to face an Army Corps. The officer of the guard was buckling on his pistol and his steel helmet, at the same time crying to his men to fall in. This they shewed no great enthusiasm to do and they were still less anxious to climb into the anti-escape ditch that had been dug to a depth of four feet round the perimeter wire, so that the officer, swearing the foulest oaths and gesticulating, picked up handfuls of pebbles and hurled them at his mutinous troops in his fury. This, as might be expected, had no effect beyond making certain that they would desert at the earliest opportunity which indeed they did some five minutes later.

Grabbing my small bundle, I went outside with the others to the playing field where already platoons and companies were being marshalled. In a matter of five minutes the roll was called and the order to move off given. Almost with the precision of a trained formation, the columns of officers and other ranks with packs, cases and other impedimenta moved away in column of threes to the left and out through the gap, into the fields at the back of the village. At last we were out, free from the restraint of the Italians and responsible for our own actions and steps, but where would they lead us?

CHAPTER 3.

FREEDOM.

It was a beautiful sunny, early autumn day as the column turned its back upon the camp and directed its feet across the stubble and on to the road running past the village. It was not long before the locals saw what was going on and came out of the houses to watch and wave and wish us luck. It was also not long before one of the Italians along the roadside was recognised as one of our erstwhile guards; it had taken him no longer to demobilise himself than was required to change into civilian clothes and slip away from the hated huts. All was silent behind us in the camp nor were there the expected sounds of shooting to be heard.

With us as we marched out to freedom came our two interpreter officers. The senior by name Captain Camino before the war had practised as a Metallurgical Consultant in Sheffield and was strongly Anglophile whilst the other, Tenente Orazi had been a clerk in a meat-packing factory in Chicago.

Much earlier in the day a reconnaisance had been made by one of the senior officers for places to hide if such an eventuality as this should occur and it was to one of these hide-outs that our way led. Through the village, down a lane and across the fields we went, a river of khaki in the sunny Italian countryside till at last we came to the dyked banks of a small river and there we halted while further plans were made. It was decided that we should remain there for the present and we all therefore kept together but concealed ourselves behind the dyke and among the many clumps of bushes that grew there.

During the reaminder of the day, a small party was sent back to the camp to gather information and what they found out was very interesting. It appeared that, some ten or fifteen minutes after the last POW had filed through the gap in the wire, one or two lorry loads of German troops arrived and entered the camp. They found the Italian Commandant in his office with some of his officers who told them that the English had gone; their furious reaction was to place the Italians under arrest and then go through the building to see what they could find.

There now occurred a series of events which surprisingly demonstrated how German discipline can be less than effective if the temptation is strong enough. Though their prey had slipped through their fingers, the German soldiers did themselves very well on the lunch that was ready for eating when the camp was evacuated, on the store of wine that was our day's ration and on the Red Cross parcel store. This latter they systematically looted, as did they also our large tobacco store before they sold the remainder which they did not want for what they could get to the villagers. The remains of most of

the parcels soon found their way out to us in our hide, brought by the locals whose sympathies were now very much on our side. Having done their worst, the Germans settled down to a torpid and drunken slumber in the camp before taking their departure some time later. In this way, the Germans undoubtedly threw away their first and best chance of recapturing their prey, when we were all together and close to the camp.

The day wore on and, in spite of the precautions taken to disguise our presence by the river, a steadily growing stream of Italians came across the fields bringing the remnants of our looted parcels to us. The two English-speaking Italian officers who had come with us returned to the village and on their return confirmed what had occurred at the camp when the Germans came and added that the Commandant and some of his officers had been taken away as prisoners. (Some years later, after the end of the War, I learned that our Italian Colonel, taken prisoner in his turn by the Germans for letting us go free, had died in captivity in Germany. In World War I he had been decorated by the British for bravery.) As soon as darkness fell on this exciting day, the order came through that we were to move again in case the Germans came upon us during the night and so we set off in files by platoons and companies southwards along the course of the river before settling down for the night, blanketless, under the bushes and trees that lined the banks of the stream.

Although I had brought my greatcoat with me, I found myself steadily growing colder as the night wore on but in the end managed to get a few hours broken sleep on the hard ground to wake up cold and stiff with the first light of morning. We made the best breakfast we could off the tinned food that we had brought with us and then took stock of the situation. In a short while, even though everyone remained hidden, the locals found us out and were soon regaling us joyfully with quite unbelievable news items supposedly heard on the radio.

Early on, sounds as of a brisk small arms battle reached our ears and reports of Germans in the vicinity were investigated and found to be without confirmation. Scouts were posted in all directions and then we all settled down for the day to see what the future would bring. The most immediate result was the report that the Allies had landed in the Gulf of Genoa; whether this was wishful thinking on the part of the Italians which they believed because it was what they wanted to happen, history does not relate but so far as we were concerned, without means of verifying, it meant that our S.B.O's plans were fortunately laid as this was the eventuality that had been hoped for. Later in the day these reports were proved to be false so he decided that, as soon as it was dark enough, we should all move south across the Via Emilia and make for the comparative safety of the mountains but he added that, as the

position was so uncertain, he would not forbid the departure of small parties from the column if they wished to make their own way from then on.

As soon as dusk fell my platoon moved off in single file through the bushes and thickets beside the river and past Italian farmhouses sleeping under a brilliant starry sky. Though our tread was made with the utmost care it was not long before the first dog was awakened and a canine chorus rising to the stars. It was taken up by one dog after another and passed from farm to farm as we stumbled through the night. This performance did not entirely redound to our disadvantage as, no doubt, the Italians thought the walkers through the night were the hated German soldiers and therefore they kept well within their doors.

Progress was slow and when I was approached by two friends from my own Regiment, Mac and Jerry with the suggestion that we make off on our own, I fell in with them and, after telling our platoon commander of our intentions, we struck off to the east across the fields with the intention of putting as much distance between the main body and ourselves as possible before dawn. We trudged on for some two miles or so and when we thought that we were in open country, settled down for a short sleep in a convenient dry ditch.

As soon as it became light Mac, who could speak the best Italian of the three of us went off to a farm we could see a couple of hundred yards away over the fields to ask whether we could have food and shelter. He was received with great suspicion and finally returned from his mission unsuccessful whereupon we made what meal we could from the tinned food we still had with us. We found that we were in a vineyard and so were able to refresh ourselves with the near-ripe fruit. As the sun rose in another cloudless sky, we lay where we were discussing what should be done when, early in the afternoon, a peasant came past our hiding place and we plucked up the necessary courage and Italian to ask him for help.

He said he would ask the farmer whose house was at the top of the field and suiting the action to the word, strode off in that direction. In a few minutes we saw him coming back; were we in luck or would we have to try again? The answer was that we were to go to the farm after dark and we would be given food and lodging for the time being. So, when the sun had set on a day which seemed to have had many times the proper quantity of hours, we rose from our ditch and went to the house. We went in single file, some yards distant from each other in case there should be a betrayal but all was well. The farmer and his wife, a weather-beaten couple of some sixty summers and winters each, made us welcome in their manner and soon we were sitting down to a magnificent plateful of steaming broth. Though the daytime was hot the nights were growing chilly with the touch of oncoming autumn and the hot soup drove the damp from our bones in a heartening way. It was also our first hot meal since supper three days

previously. The meal over, our host shewed us into the guests' bedroom, a warm congenial hayloft where we each spent a pleasant night, sleeping well and relaxed after the nervous tension of the preceding days.

For the next week we remained at this farm which we found was only sbme three miles from the camp. Many tales reached us and we made contact with small groups of other ex-prisoners from the camp who were, like ourselves, residing on nearby farms. It turned out that most of the main group had split into small parties which were laying up in the neighbourhood till reliable news would enable them to form useful plans for the future. The farmer would not have us on the premises during daylight so we would go into the fields and meet our friends, taking a loaf and wine with us and passing the days in that manner. As soon as it became dark we would return to our hot meal and when we got to know our hosts better a discussion would follow in our stilted but steadily-improving Italian.

They were anxious to learn of the English way of living, what our previous histories had been and what we thought would be the out-come of the war. The German radio kept announcing that unless the Italians who were harbouring British prisoners gave them up, when the prisoners were found as they claimed they assuredly would be, the Italians would suffer heavily for their folly. Before this announcement there had been one offering substantial rewards for information leading to the recapture of ex-prisoners but this had evoked no response, so threats were tried which had even less success, if that were possible.

There was, however, in the village someone with pro-German feelings for information was given which led to the searching of one house reputed to harbour a British officer. It did indeed harbour one but this officer was, fortunately for himself, able to speak the language like a native. The German search-party came to the house and, the owners being away in the fields, the British officer opened the door to them. One of the Germans spoke a little Italian and when he said that he was looking for a British officer, he was invited to make a thorough search of the house, conducted all the time by the one for whom he was searching. From cellar to attic the party went, probing and seeking; to their questionings as to where the officer was, they were assured that their informant had been mistaken and after some time they all departed whence they came. Few Germans bothered to learn Italian so that they were usually unable to discern when they were speaking with an Englishman who spoke Italian with a fair degree of confidence and thus often missed a capture they would otherwise have made. The story of this search soon spread through the village and their estimation of the British was greatly raised.

Our hosts now began to be rather jumpy and kept asking when we intended

to leave but we tried to put off the evil day as long as possible. One of our main difficulties, now that we were speedily overcoming the language problem, was procuring civilian clothes without which it would not be safe for us to move about during daylight. We asked our host if he could fix us up but as we were all larger than the normal run of Italians, he was not able to do so. Further there was a big demand for such clothes from all those other escapees in the neighbourhood and there were many extraordinary outfits to be seen. They did however suggest that if it would be any help they could dye our shirts and trousers blue or brown, which kind offer was accepted.

The next day they borrowed some ill-fitting clothing for us while our shirts were dyed brown and our trousers blue. We still had no jackets other than our battle dress but they would have to do for the present and when our things were dry we found that we were not nearly so conspicuous as before and well-clad into the bargain. We compared very favourably with the "stage bandit" appearance of some of our friends in their borrowed plumes. Footwear was also a problem; I had my Army boots which I decided to retain against the long walk that I foresaw I would have to make even though they were easily recognisable by sharp-eyed Germans.

On the 18th September came the announcement over the Italian radio that Marshal Badoglio had declared war on Germany; this however tended to make the Italians more suspicious than helpful since they thought that now the Germans would kill them all on sight. At any rate my host intimated that we might advantageously find other accommodation so I scouted around the already-overcrowded neighbourhood for another farm. Jerry and Mac agreed that under the circumstances it would be better to split and on the 20th, with my few belongings on my back I betook myself to the farm of one Maestri at the village of Toccalmatta, about one and a half miles from Fontanellato. It was a much larger and more modern farm but there was, as usual, a fly in the ointment. To be more accurate, there were millions; they crawled up the walls in their thousands and over the food in their hundreds, flying from dung-heap to kitchen and back with the greatest impartiality and frequency.

Maestri and his family welcomed me. I was given the luxury of a separate bedroom, a change from the draughty loft in which we had previously been sleeping and in return for my keep I said I would be happy to help on the farm. I was taken at my word and found a new experience in my life.

Since I had left the camp the weather had been more than kind; there had been a succession of those days that are the foreigners' conception of sunny Italy. The Plain of Lombardy shimmered in the dusty heat of the late summer and the distant Alps hung like a backcloth of dream mountains across the horizon. Daily the air was filled with a procession of vast and cumbrous Messerschmitt transport planes and a never-ending stream of vehicles paraded back and forth

along the main road two miles away. Horrid tales were told of the bodies of Italians lying on the road, crushed by the tracks of Hitler's tanks and all the while the grapes swelled on the vines and purpled in the hot sun in anticipation of the coming harvest.

My day was well arranged; in the mornings I would help on the farm, lifting sugar-beet (a back-breaking job) or muck-spreading which was an equally tiring form of entertainment. Then after a generous lunch of pasta and rough red wine, I would betake myself over the fields to where a small group of my friends would meet to spend the afternoon in speculation as to the trend of coming events and make plans for getting back to our own homes. By now we had come to the conclusion that, in view of the slow progress made in the invasion of Italy, if we were to wait where we were for the arrival of our own troops, we might be there till doomsday and the general consensus of opinion was for a move, some said to Switzerland and some to the south but understandably no one was anxious to leave their comfortable billets for the uncertainty of the open country.

Then the weather broke and for several days it was impossible to work in fields so, as the grapes had been harvested, all hands on the farm were turned to the task of making the wine. Basket after basket of fine black grapes would be emptied into the large trough for pressing; I was entreated to take my turn, sans boots, in the trough, but I said I was unskilled and would prefer to lift the tubs of grape juice from the trough to the vats. This was, as it turned out, a far more exhausting job than I had anticipated.

Sometimes I would be engaged in conversation by the farmer's daughters, children of eight and nine who were always much intrigued by the few English books that I had managed to bring with me and were avid for information about the British Isles. I explained that they were situated away to the north of their sunny land, that there was more rain and fog and that it was much colder. I told them of Wales and Ireland and Scotland whereupon they assured me that Scotland was an island inhabited by a barbaric people who did not even have windows in their houses. My efforts to correct them were received with doubt; could this grotesque distortion of the facts have been the work of the Fascist teaching? In between these tetes-a-tete, they made the day hideous with their continuous fighting and screaming so that it was a joy to be out of the house in the open fields.

By this time I was getting anxious about what I was to do and, though I was inclined to make for Switzerland, I could not bring myself to the point of setting out. In the end action was forced upon me. Shortly after the misty dawn of the 29th September, I was woken by a battering on my door which opened to reveal Maestri on the threshold in a great state of alarm. The village

Carabiniere, the policeman, had just rushed in with the news that the Germans had begun a large-scale sweep of the neighbourhood with special forces and that I would therefore be well-advised to make a getaway into the fields. From the almost incoherent spate of Italian that fell from his lips, I pieced this news together and I was then almost forcibly propelled out of the house with a crust in my hand and told to take cover in a nearby ditch.

After a little while as the coast seemed clear I made my way across the fields to spend the rest of the day in discussion with a group of my friends who had received similar treatment from their hosts. It seemed that there was really something in this story and we came to the conclusion that the neighbourhood was getting too hot to hold us and that, in any case, it was not right to outstay the welcome that we had enjoyed from the simple Italian farming folk. We therefore made certain plans for the morrow; four of us would start early and, for the present, make for the town of Bardi in the mountains to the south where we were told there were many friendly Italians. My friend Buck, who was to be one of the four, returned with me to Maestri's farm that night. Our host only took us in with the greatest reluctance but finally we were put in the hayloft, a big come-down after my luxurious bedroom and he seemed to be appeased when we assured him that we would be gone for good the next day. I was a bit concerned about how to follow our route as the only map I had been able to obtain was a tiny one torn from the pages of an elementary school atlas belonging to one of the children but it was just better than none at all.

CHAPTER 4.

ON THE MOVE.

The morning of the 30th September dawned fine but misty after a peaceful night, free from alarms. We were given an early breakfast and almost before we had finished, the other two arrived. We then set out Buck, John, Bunny and myself across the fields wondering what the future had in store for us and where our steps would turn. I had said that I wanted to be home by Christmas, jokingly, though I never dreamed in my wildest moments that my intention would be uncannily fulfilled. We travelled light and fast through the damp fields and past the farms whose occupants were hardly astir. We planned to skirt West of Fidenza where there was reputed to be a German garrison and then after crossing the main road and railway, to strike into the hills. We had already learned one thing which was that the Germans seldom strayed from a main road or a large town and this knowledge was to prove of inestimable value in the days and weeks to come.

After about three hours march, we came upon the railway - the first of the two obstacles to be negotiated. We were travelling along a deep stream-bed which we found running straight towards the railway and, crawling and fighting our way through the thick undergrowth, we passed safely under the track. Perhaps we seemed over-cautious, but at the very outset of our journey we did not feel inclined to run any unnecessary risks so chose a long brick drain as our means of passing under the road. I was leading the procession up this drain, little bigger than a man and, on coming out into the daylight at the far end through a thick hedge, I found myself face to face with an Italian peasant. Who was the more surprised, I cannot say but he did not hinder us as we cut away across the fields. Perhaps he thought he heard a badger in the drain but if he did, he said nothing beyond giving us "Good day".

It may seem that we were taking somewhat excessively careful precautions but it must be borne in mind firstly that we had no intention of being recaptured through carelessness and secondly that we had good reason, from the military point of view, to expect bridges to be guarded or under some kind of supervision. In fact, as will be seen from time to time, there were usually no guards.

As we left the road behind we joined a country road running upwards and southwards along the crest of a rising ridge past some large but dilapidated houses. Looking back, we could see that even in the course of a mile or so we had risen quite considerably above the level of the Plain in which we had passed the previous five months and we could also see for the first time the extent of the military traffice on the main road, the Via Emilia. On our right


Fiorenzuola d'Arda
Alseno
Fidenza
N° 9
Soragna
Castellina
Chiusa
Castellicardi
Albareto
Priorato
Campazzo
Salso
Parola
Fontevivo
Fontana
Castelguelfo
Pontetaro
PARMA
Salsomaggiore
Tabiano Bagni
Cangelasio
M. Poggiolaccio
Trinità
Vigoleno
Lugagnano Val d'Arda
Castell'Arquato
Vernasca
Pellegrino Parmense
S. Antonio
M. Canate
Iggio
Castellaro
M. S. Cristina
Varano de'Marchesi
Medesano
Noceto
Collecchio
Sala Baganza
Felino
Fornovo di Taro
Respiccio
Piantonia
N° 62
Sivizzano
Langhirano
Traversetolo
S. Polo
Varsi
Contile
Bardi
Bore
Metti
M. Caramelo
Chiesablanca
Vianino
Serravalle
Solignano
Berceto
Calestano
Lesignano de' Bagni
Mamiano
Basilicagoiano
Monticelli Terme
Gainago
Colorno
Copermio
Sorbolo
Ramoscello
S. Lazzaro
Gattatico
Marano
Pecorile
Vigatto
Corcagnano
Carignano
Torrechiara
S. Michele di Tiorre
S. Secondo Parm.
Roncole
Grugno
Viarolo
S. Pancrazio Parm.
Madregolo
Lemignano
Ozzano
Miano
Ramiola
Viazzano
Scarampi
Faggio
Varano de' Melegari
Riccò
Gaiano
Oriano
Citerna
Bottione
M. Barigazzo
Rugarlo
Tosca
Rocca
M. Dosso
Golaso
Tognoni
Franchi
Fiori

18a

in a narrow valley ran a metalled highway but there was no sign of life on it with the exception of an occasional farm cart. Ahead of us rose the main ridge of the Appenines, fir-clad and sparsely inhabited.

The day was drawing on and there was no immediate prospect of a night's shelter. Owing to the easy life we had been leading, we were all suffering in varying degrees from soreness of the feet and were extremely tired for we had already covered twelve or more miles of hard going without much food. Soon we were passing a large hutted camp among the fir trees and as we saw there were German troops moving about, we had to drive our flagging bodies yet further for no Italian would take us in with the enemy in such close proximity. In the end, we finally dragged ourselves another couple of miles along the mule track we were then following and entered the village of Vigoleno, nestling among the hills.

We asked for shelter at the first house on entering the village. Luck was with us; we were right royally made welcome and invited in by the farmer, a well-to-do man with a prosperous looking house. In what seems less time than to tell of it, we were sitting down at a well-covered table to a magnificent supper with which our host offered a choice of a more than palatable red or white sparkling wine. When I remarked that this seemed a very fine drink, he replied that before the war it had been exported and was quite well known.

The meal over, we were all taken to the house of an old couple in the village who had spent many years in England and who had many fond memories of the country. They gave us an even warmer welcome, if that were possible, and a glass of excellent wine. They told us of their son who was still in England and of whom they had naturally received no news for years; we were given messages to carry home from this heartbroken couple. There then followed the ceremony of listening to the nine o'clock news broadcast in Italian from the B.B.C. a custom we found had been widely observed even during the Mussolini regime even though there had been heavy penalties for so doing. After this we returned to our farm with a tearful farewell and godspeed from the aged pair; it was in its way very touching to find Italians so pro-English.

Our bedroom was the familiar hayloft and as the night was turning cold we burrowed well down into the hay and gave our aching bones and muscles the rest for which they had been crying out for so long. The depth of our sleep proved that a comfortable bed is an unnecessary luxury if one is healthily tired.

We awoke to the sound of raindrops falling on the roof of our loft and further investigation shewed that, unless we were willing to get very wet, we would have to delay our start till the weather cleared. So we took stock of

our possessions as our chore before lunch. I was travelling in my blue-dyed slacks and brown-dyed shirt with my battle dress blouse and army-issue boots. With me I had a razor and strop, shaving brush, towel, four handkerchiefs and three pairs of spare socks. I was also carrying, very carefully wrapped in a piece of linen, a new travelling alarm clock which I had bought in Fontanellato as a 21st birthday present for my brother at home. It was a Swiss clock purchased with hardly-saved lire from my P.O.W. "pay" and I imagined it was something unlikely to be obtainable in war-time U.K. To these must be added my diary and the aforesaid map and my list of possessions is complete. There was a lot to be said for travelling light. We each had a minimum of a hundred lire which had been issued before we left the camp for use in emergencies and I also had my Middle East officers identity card which later proved of great use.

The lunch we were given was an even finer meal than that offered the night before. There was roast duck as the main course, to be liberally washed down with the red and white wine to which we had been introduced at the previous supper. After lunch, as the weather had cleared we set forth. We had no clear and accurate line of march, mainly because the map was useless except for giving the general trend of the country. We went through the village and came out on to a side road along which we trudged in the general direction of the hills ahead. Progress was slowed up by the conversations we were continually compelled to make with passing Italians. We fondly thought that, even if they did not recognise us for what we were, they would let us go on our way unhindered. It came out in the end that we were usually taken for returning Italian soldiers of whom there were many thousands roaming the countryside and the locals were very anxious to get news of those they knew.

Because of these delays, by the time darkness began to fall we had only covered half a dozen odd miles to reach the tiny village of Trinita, a mere handful of houses in a sparsely inhabited valley. We found the villagers very friendly and ready to help but as they were poor and the houses small, we were split between two families for the evening meal and then we foregathered afterwards to hear the wireless news.

The big item for the day was the B.B.C. announcement regarding ex-prisoners in Italy. The Germans had said they would shoot all those who did not give themselves up within a time limit, if they were recaptured. They were officially warned that, if this threat was carried out, those responsible would pay the full penalty when caught. They were told that if they did succeed in recapturing ex-prisoners, they must treat them according to the Geneva Convention.

The following morning, the 2nd October, dawned fine and sunny after the dull afternoon of the previous day. From the village, after a hearty farewell, we set off up a steep mule track through the chestnut forest for the next village of Rigollo in the adjoining valley. Quickly we gained altitude and after a strenuous hour of climbing we breasted the ridge to be rewarded with a glorious view. Mountain and valley tangled together into the blue distance beneath the cloudless Italian sky, fir trees, mighty chestnuts, small stone houses and red roofs. Away to our right was a hill meadow, swept by the keen fresh air and below in a hollow nestled Rigollo.

We ran down the hill and, gasping for breath went to the first house and asked if they could provide us with bread and cheese to ward off the mid-morning pangs. This was always a problem for, whatever their good qualities and they were many, the Italians usually had the very sketchiest grasp of the necessity for a proper breakfast. Whether it was merely their way of life or whether due to the lack of food, we never discovered.

In due course a plateful of brown wholemeal bread, a heap of cheese and a flask of wine were brought which we waded into with the hearty appetites of open-air travellers. I was immediately struck by the strength of the flavour of the cheese but, having professed my particular craving for strong cheeses, had not the face to refuse. The other three allowed no such scruples to interfere with their refusal when it became noticeable that the whole mass of the cheese was slowly but surely moving. Not, it may be said, moving in any particular direction but just moving. One close look was more than enough, the cheese was a closely packed heap of tiny maggots heaving, squirming. Finishing with dry bread washed down with rough wine, we stumbled forth into the fresh air and were on our way.

From the village we joined the almost dry bed of a mountain torrent and spent the hot afternoon scrambling upwards into the hills, crossing from side to side over the hot boulders between which dashed and sparkled the peat-brown water more reminiscent of Scotland than of Italy.

Towards evening four hot, dusty and very weary tramps came in sight of the expected village. Earlier in the afternoon we had asked a peasant how far it might be to Pozzolo, "Only a little", he had said. We found that this might be anything from an hour's to a day's hard walking. As the village came into sight round a corner of the valley our eyes fell upon one of the more remarkable villages I have seen. It was clustered at the head of the valley, on the crest and under a huge rock, for all the world like some scene from a children's book come to life. We found a man working in the fields and asked him whether he knew a house where we could stay for the night. He said he would lead us to the village and find somewhere for us, a task he performed with the utmost

efficiency. We were received by a family like long-lost sons.

There was always this problem, towards the end of a day's march, of finding lodgings for the night in a village because there was the ever-present possibility of some unfriendly Italian being tempted to give us away to the Germans. One way which logically seemed "safe" was to buttonhole someone working in the fields outside the chosen village because it was unlikely that anyone performing such menial (but important) work would be on the side of the oppressors and indeed these simple precautions never really let us down.

Away the next morning after an excellent breakfast of bread and milk, through beautiful open countryside wandering along small farm tracks in the brilliant sunshine till we came to the village of Villora, another small collection of tiny houses whose owners we had come to find had hearts of gold. A sort of reception committee was organised for our advantage and it seemed as though the honour of entertaining us would fall to the highest bidder.

We sat on a wall in the afternoon sun until it became evident that the reception committee had either lost interest, reached an impasse or forgotten what it was supposed to be doing. The position became further complicated by the arrival of another party of ex-prisoners, four strong, which was almost too much for the village. By reason of this, we were overlooked until an Italian obviously poorer than the rest came by and asked in English if he could help. We told him what had happened and were thereupon taken into the inn and given drinks, becoming once more the centre of attraction. After we had been stood a couple of drinks, interest again began to wane and we were back where we started from so we went outside and held a council of war as to whether we should strike ahead for the next village. As we did not know where or how far this might be and the day was well advanced, we abandoned the proposition and just as we were giving up hope, the wife of the poor Italian appeared and invited us into her tiny house.

To say these folk lived near the margin would have been to gloss over their state but their hearts made up for what their purses lacked. We were given a good meal of fried potatoes, cooked in what must have been the last of her butter and half an egg apiece. The wife explained in halting English that they had British passports, as indeed they shewed them to us, and had been very coldly treated by the Fascists during the war as a result. There being no artificial light, we were soon shewn to bed in a tiny eight foot square hayloft where the ventilation was remarkable for its absence.

Lying there in the sweet-smelling but prickly hay that evening before we dropped off to sleep, I ruminated on the events which had led the four of us to

the loft in this small Italian hill-village of Villora. Then I would be brought back to the immediate problem by a question from one of my companions. Apart from general policy, the most urgent need was to decide what was to be done in the immediate future. Although we had not yet covered much of our proposed route, the unaccustomed exertions which had already taken a toll of our strength coupled with the generally inadequate food would very soon compel us to take a few days rest to build up reserves of strength. It was our general plan, once we were really fit to make our way with the best possible speed southwards towards our own troops. Our target was in the region of twenty-five miles a day but at the moment all we were doing was about a dozen and feeling all-in afterwards.

The night we stayed in Trinita we had been able to see a large scale motoring map and I, for some reason I cannot account for, had chosen a village called Pieve near Bardi as one of our stopping places. I have previously mentioned that we had heard of a town in the hills where there were a large number of pro-English Italians and this place was Bardi. The town itself seemed to be, to us, a place to be avoided but there was no reason why the surrounding country might not be accommodating. We therefore planned that evening to make for this village of Pieve on the morrow.

As there was little breakfast on offer there was nothing to detain us for long, and we were again away to an early start down the hill along the usual mule track till we eventually came to the main road. Over this quickly and into the scrub on the other side by the banks of the River Ceno; this was about one hundred yards wide but very shallow so, after removing shoes and socks, we essayed the crossing and away about a couple of miles to our right we could see the old picturesque town of Bardi sleeping in the warm sunshine. As this operation and the subsequent half hour's walk the other side were in very open countryside without any cover we were still slightly apprehensive about being seen by Germans. We must have been very obviously not Italians to the discerning eye and were not yet entirely used to roaming a technically enemy country in full daylight.

From where we had crossed the river, it was necessary to climb about three hundred feet up a steep hillside, then work round a bluff in order to reach Pieve and when we did round the bluff at about 3 p.m. to see our destination apparently miles away and higher up the mountainside, our hearts and spirits fell. But just at the crucial moment, when we were in the middle of negotiating a difficult gritty scree slope, we heard the deep throbbing of powerful engines. Turning our eyes to the shimmering blue sky, we could see a large formation of American Fortress bombers heading for home, their bombs dropped on targets in the Plain. The sight of these silver shapes and the

knowledge that the men inside them were our friends and were fighting for us, gave us just that extra bit of encouragement to enable us to go on.

It was the last bit of the hill into the village that nearly defeated us. Apart from a very light breakfast, we had eaten almost nothing for eighteen hours. The four of us had reached the state when each step seemed to drain the last drop of energy from our legs. I know that unless I had done the last few yards practically on all fours, I could never have succeeded.

As we reached the top of the hill, an Italian appeared on the track, looking at us with a smile on his face then to our astounded ears suddenly came the words, in English and Cockney too, "Good evening boys; what can I do for you?" He introduced himself, Agostino Ferrari; there he stood a stocky, weatherbeaten man with a bullock hitched to a primitive wooden sledge behind him. To our unasked question he said that he had lived in England for more than twenty years and if we wanted lodging we had better follow him. Finding someone who so obviously wanted to help and who spoke our language like a Londoner put new life into us and squaring our loads on our shoulders, we staggered off on the last hundred yards to the village.

CHAPTER 5.

AMONGST FRIENDS.

This village, Pieve di Bardi, was a community of some twenty families living in small but cosy stone houses perched on the side of a steep mountain three hundred feet above the valley. The villagers were of stout peasantry; they were uncorrupted by Fascism and only wished to be allowed to live in the way their ancestors had done for hundreds of years. The war had hardly come to their village except to take away some of the young men; one of these Aldo Ferrari, had been conscripted into the Air Force but on the surrender of Italy had departed homewards and was then straining to take up arms against the hated Germans. The only access to the village was a very rough and steep mule path down to the road more than a mile away.

We were soon provided with a cigarette and then a good meal after which we sat and chatted with Agostino about the good old days in London. He had been a chef for twenty two years in the Connaught Rooms in Long Acre in Holborn but had been shipped back to Italy in June of 1940 when his naturalisation papers did not go through. He lived very near where I worked before the war so we found many points of common interest together.

He went on to explain that, if we did not mind, we would have to sleep in a hayloft as the small Italian houses did not run to spare bedrooms but that he would arrange for meals for as long as we liked to stay. That night we slept well satisfied that we had found a friend indeed.

And so it turned out. We were looked after to the best of their ability; sometimes we were fed in one farm, sometimes by another. One night I was supping alone at the house "detailed" by Agostino to entertain me; I went into the large flagged chamber that served as living room and kitchen combined and found sitting by the fire an old man with a cloth cap pulled over his eyes and a flowing walrus moustache. Going over to him I bade him good evening; he then asked me in Italian who I was and I told him that I was a British officer trying to escape the Germans. Then suddenly changing to perfect Cockney he said "Come and eat, its on the table". When we had sat down, he offered me some wine and after I had drunk some said "D'you like it?"
"Yes", I replied, "but its not half so good as beer."
He cocked a wistful eye at me, still with the cap on and said "Gorblimey Guv'nor, beer ..... that's the stuff" and spat on the floor.

Our march from Fontanellato to Pieve some thirty five hard miles, had taken more out of us than we expected and for a couple of days after our arrival I, for one, was feverish and exhausted. It was a very pleasant surprise to find

that there were four others from our camp living off the village and they duly came to see us. They had had much the same experiences as ourselves and were on the point of departing for points south. Their dwelling was, compared with our loft, desirable in the extreme. It was tucked into the hillside a hundred feet above the village among the chestnuts, a tiny stone hut measuring about twelve feet each way. As it was on the steep side of the hill, the floor was at a steep angle and the interior filled to within five feet of the roof with chestnut leaves. Buck and I were enchanted with it! We agreed to take it over as soon as they left.

While staying in Pieve we encountered another strange facet of wartime in Italy. One evening Agostino said he would take us to hear the news in English so after supper we set forth in the pitch darkness, stumbling along behind him along the rough forest paths for about a quarter of an hour. We then came upon a wooden cabin in the proverbial clearing and Agostino knocked on the door. After being admitted we were led up the stairs into a crowded smoky room where several husky Italians were bunched round a magnificent and obviously very expensive radio. The contrast between the luxury of this electrical equipment and the rude dwelling which contained it was striking. This was the first of several we encountered but I never solved the mystery of the radiograms in the log cabins to my satisfaction.

By the 9th October, John and Bunny had come to the decision that they wanted to set out on their own way south heading down into Tuscany as they had heard that the cooking in that province was the best in Italy. However they could not leave on that day as from dawn till dark, the heavens wept solid water. Furthermore we were forced to spend a cold cheerless afternoon concealed in our loft when two Fascist police put in an appearance. Agostino was very worried as he feared he might have been given away by the priest in the next village who was an ardent anti-Ally but all they were looking for were secret hoards of potatoes that ought to have been sent to Germany. As soon as they had gone, we sallied forth to warm over Agostino's fire and talk of the days before the war that were gone.

The next day John and Bunny made their departure. It was sad to see them go but as Buck was "grounded" temporarily by his feet, I could not go with them and leave him on his own. Further, we had intended to make for Ancona in the hope of finding some naval escape organisation there but the other two favoured Tuscany, as has already been said. I heard no more of them for many months and then it was the sad news that they did indeed reach their chosen Tuscany but they were picked up by the Germans and taken off to Germany.

When John and Bunny had gone, the weather improved and as the chalet was now vacant we moved in. This was not a demanding task as "moving" involved

nothing more than merely taking our bodies there with our total belongings easily held in one hand. Later, we were seated before our residence, admiring the view and discussing the future when a scruffy individual appeared and addressed us in execrable Italian. He turned out to be an escaped Yugoslav prisoner, a lieutenant, who informed us that he was the adjutant of a self-styled partisan group; he was very anxious for us to join, listing the advantages that might be expected to accrue such as food in plenty and clothing, not to mention a chance of fighting the Germans again.

We heard him out then politely refused stating that we were more anxious to get home and rejoin the allied army where our training would be used to better advantage. News of some of these guerillas had already come to our ears and all they were at that time was merely a hindrance to the war effort and many of them were no better than bandits. They seldom ventured to take any action against Germans and when they did take any at all it was usually against an Italian village that was reputed to be "Fascist" and was merely an excuse for looting. There may have been those who did worry the Germans but I think these came later.

For the next five days we stayed in Pieve but began to think about getting fit for the next stage of the journey. We made long walks up the mountains behind us and visited two R.A.F. ex-prisoners living in a deserted farm. The mountain Monte Barigazza commanded a breathtaking view which was almost beyond description.

To the north lay the lower slopes of the hills, brown and green in the autumn sun, the rivers threading their way like silver streaks towards the Plain of Lombardy in the green-blue haze of the distance. Behind it all, in the deep blue sky hung the curtain of the Alps almost too hazy to be seen. To the east and west beneath our feet the ranges of the Appennines rolled away to the horizon. To the south was the town of Bardi with its forbidding mediaeval castle against the background of another swelling hill, green with fir trees and dappled with the cloud shadows racing over the land. Buck and I would sit in a grassy cup, drinking the wine-strong air, in silence. From a toy village a thousand feet below would come faintly the lowing of cattle or the barking of dogs and in the further distance perchance a miniature train creeping forward, marking its progress with a chain of cotton-wool puffs. Never a sound of war to spoil the picture.

It was a place to which I went with happiness in my heart for here we were secure from German search parties - nothing could get within miles without being seen. Here, lying in the sun and brushed by mountain breezes, Buck and I finally crystallised our plans. Firstly we would make a wide circle round the nearby town of Borgotaro where there was a sizeable German force and local

H.Q. and then make our way along the line of the mountains, keeping as far as possible in the hills and work our way southwards. We abandoned our idea of making for Ancona; we decided that a long walk with the fighting chance of ultimate success was preferable to the lottery of a way out by sea even though we had received rumours of some official organisation to that end. We considered that if we avoided any village of more than a dozen houses, kept off main roads and kept moving, common sense and our general army training would help us through. The problem of how to get through the German lines was shelved until such time as the question became more immediate.

One afternoon while wandering round the top of our mountain we came across a quantity of mushrooms which we picked thinking to take them to the Ferrari family as a gift which would be appreciated. They were, in fact, appreciated but Agostino told us that funghi were to Italians what the mushroom is to the Englishman. That evening, as if to prove the point to our hosts, not the Ferraris this time, gave us a grand supper mainly composed of violently-coloured toadstools cooked in gravy which were nevertheless very tasty once we had become acclimatised to their unusual colouration.

Another afternoon, in view of the fact that we had not been able to take a bath for more than a fortnight, we decided that the time had come literally to take the plunge. As the village could not provide any facilities, we had to fall back upon or, more exactly into, the torrent that crashed down the mountainside close to our hut. The breath-snatching chill of the rushing waters and the resultant glow therefrom gave us both a feeling of cleanliness though whether we were long enough immersed to give the grimed layers time to be dissolved is very much open to doubt!

After the bath we walked the few hundred yards to the neighbouring village of Bre where we were entertained to lunch by some friends of the Ferraris. On our return to the chalet, we were met by Aldo who informed us that there was a spot of bother in Pieve and we could not go down for our evening meal. He said he would bring it up to us and, half an hour later we saw a small column consisting of Aldo, his sister and another villager approaching with cans and baskets. These contained our evening meal as well as something for breakfast as we had been in the habit of bringing our breakfast or the "raw materials" therefor back in the evenings after supper. It was a good meal of the usual minestrone with bread but the day was dark and dismal so that we had to turn in as darkness fell. Trying to burrow deeper into the leaves, various of the tenderer parts of our bodies would come into contact with the hard, dry husks of chestnuts to the dismay of the tender parts, very prickly bedfellows!

The following day after one of our climbs to our hill-top, when we had finished our supper with the Ferraris, another villager came into the room and said that there was a large body of English outside wanting lodging. Ferrari, Buck and I went out to find that this was indeed true; there were twelve of our erstwhile camp-mates standing forlornly in the dark in the small village square. They were all nearly dead-beat having made the journey from Fontanellato at top speed. It transpired that there had at last been some strong measures taken by the Germans and most of those still in the area of the camp decided it was time they were on their way.

Agostino managed to stow them all somewhere for the night and when Buck and I returned to the chalet, we decided that it was time for us to be going if we did not want to outstay the welcome afforded by this more than generous village. The next day, the 18th October, we kept well out of the way and told Agostino that we would definitely leave on the morrow. In the evening it was arranged that we go to sup in Bre with the lunch friends of several days ago and we were treated to a first class meal in the local inn, afterwards listening in to the B.B.C. for the real news and Radio Rome for light entertainment (being the German version of the news for Italian consumption). We had some very enjoyable conversation with the locals and finally one of them admiring my khaki battle dress jacket, offered to give me a civilian one in exchange. I leapt at this offer which included a dirty old tweed cap and was amazed to find on the tailor's label, the name and address of a firm in Llanelly.

Our bedroom turned out to be a cozy barn full of sweet-smelling hay (the weather having become too wet to make our return to the chalet) and we were provided with blankets, an unexpected luxury. Just before we dropped off to sleep there was a terrific explosion in the middle distance, followed by a single rifle shot but when we made enquiries in the morning, no one could or would explain these. We were up early and soon eating our last meal in Pieve, breakfast with the Ferraris.

In a way it seemed a big break to leave Pieve and the Ferrari family for they had been more generous and helpful than we could ever have expected in our wildest dreams. To sit in their home and talk with them was as though we were back in England again; nothing was too much trouble provided it was in their power to get it for us. I had a conference with father and son as to the best route and they recommended that we should avoid the town of Borgotaro; they tried to obtain a good map but their search was not successful and we had to continue to rely on the page from the atlas.

After breakfast we took the names and addresses of friends and relations

of the Ferraris in England. Then, putting our luggage in our pockets we made our farewells, tried to express fully our thanks for all they had done and amid the tears of the womenfolk, strode out of the village and away down the hill in the direction of the nearby hamlet of Prato della Femmina. It was only a matter of some five miles but the going was rough, over a boulder-strewn stream-bed and then in a drizzling rain up a steepish hillside over the fields to reach our destination. It was a long enough stage to make us realise that our stay in Pieve, pleasant though it had been, had tended to soften up those muscles we were going to need for the long walk.

Prato consisted of not more than half a dozen houses and we soon found someone to look after us. He was one of those musical hall Italians, oily hair, curly mustachios and glistening gold teeth. He gave us a grand lunch of roast lamb washed down with wine followed by some brief accounts of his travels. He had spent some time in Chicago and his English was embroidered with some of the more violent Americanisms. His small son, aged two, then appeared; he was plainly the apple of his father's eye. I asked what he was going to do when he grew up to which his father, holding the child up at arms length in the air, replied

"When he grow-a da up, he sell-a da ice-a da cream like-a his father."

Buck and I both dissolved into fits of laughter. But for all his blarney and expensive appearance, he had a heart of gold. In no time our damp clothes were dry before a blazing fire and we felt new men. He told us that there were some other English living in a deserted farm a couple of miles away and so we spent the afternoon visiting them and having a good chat.

The night was spent in a rather draughty stone hut full of oak leaves some of which I attempted to smoke in my pipe in default of tobacco. That was the first time I had tried them ..... and the last. On the morrow we could not get away till nearly midday owing to heavy rain. "Ice-a da cream" was becoming agitated, saying that there were fascists about but he did offer to come with us for the first three miles of our journey.

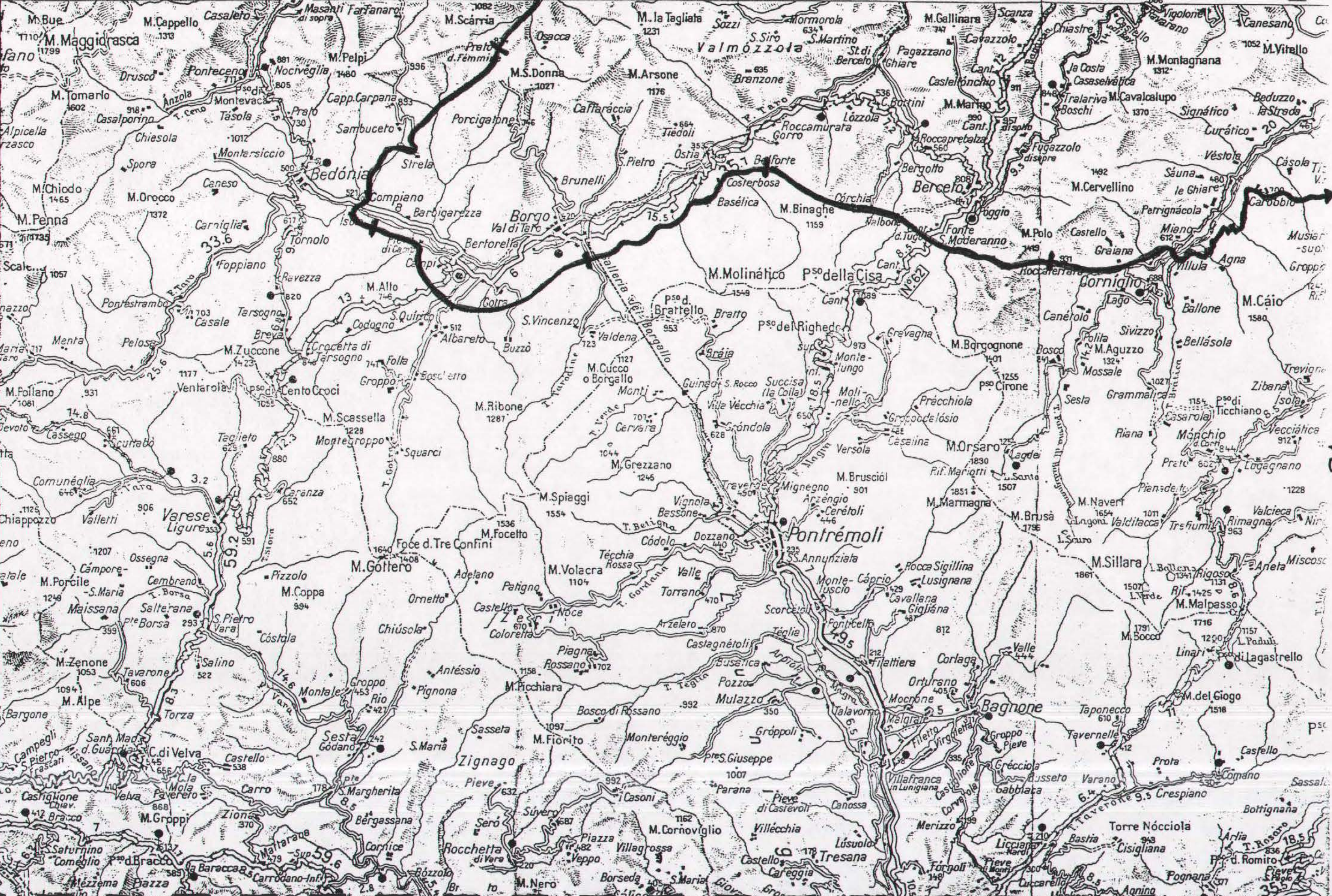
He left us at the top of a high ridge from which the country could be seen laid out before us. The sun was breaking through and the shadows chasing each other across the fields. In half an hour we were in a small village where we asked for something to eat. This we were given but the farmer chased us out of the farm and insisted that we eat the very adequate food offered in the stable in company with his donkey; the donkey was a much better-mannered person than the farmer. On again we went by side roads and bridle paths till we came down to the River Taro at Compiano, a sizeable town. We had planned to wade across (before we saw it) but we were faced with a brownish,

boiling torrent some fifty yards wide. Our luck was in; a hundred yards up the road was a footbridge, nor was there a sign of any guards about so, putting our best feet forward we strode along and over the river.

Reverting to the donkey incident, it was another of the many examples of the faint-heartedness of some Italians. As soon as there was an Englishmen within their doors, they thought that they would be immediately descended upon by a posse of German troops. This was so even in the depths of the country where the enemy never penetrated. If they had done so the efficiency of the bush telegraph was such, on these occasions, that the news of their coming spread to the uttermost house almost before the party was on its way.

For some sub-conscious reason both of us had regarded the River Taro as Caesar regarded the Rubicon and we now felt that, with this obstacle safely behind us we would find the going all plain sailing.

A couple of miles beyond the river through a large chestnut forest we came to a lone farm as darkness fell.


M. Bue
M. Maggidrasca
M. Cappello
Casaleto
Masanti
Farfanaro
M. Scàrria
M. la Tagliata
Sozzi
Mormorola
M. Gallinara
Scanza
Vigolone
Canesano
Valmózzola
S. Siro
S. Martino
St. di Berceto
Ghiare
Pagazzano
Cavazzolo
Chiastre
M. Vitello
M. Tomarlo
Drusco
Ponteceno
Nociveglia
M. Pelpi
Preto d. Femmina
Osacca
M.S. Donna
M. Arsone
Branzone
Castelfonchio
Casaselvatica
La Costa
M. Montagnana
Tralariva
Boschi
M. Cavalcalupo
Beduzzo
la Strada
Signàtico
Casalporino
Montevaca
Tàsola
Prato
Capp. Carpana
Sambuceto
Porcigatone
Caffaràccia
Tiédoli
Ostia
C. Bortini
Lòzzola
Roccamurata
Gorro
M. Marino
Roccaprebalza
Fugazzolo
Curàtico
Vèstola
Alpicella
Chiesola
Montersiccio
Spore
Bedónia
Strela
Brunelli
S. Pietro
Belforte
Costerbosa
Bergotto
Berceto
M. Cervellino
Sauna
le Ghiare
Càsola
M. Chiodo
M. Orocco
Caneso
Compiano
Barbigarezza
Borgo Val di Taro
Basélica
M. Binaghe
Corchia
Poggio
Fonte S. Moderanno
M. Polo
Castello
Perrignàcola
Graiana
Miano
Carobbio
M. Penna
Carniglia
Tórnolo
Bertorella
Campi
M. Molinàtico
P.so della Cisa
Roccaferrara
Corniglio
Villula
Agna
Musiara
Groppo
Scale
Foppiano
Ravezza
M. Alto
Gotra
Pontestrambo
Casale
Tarsogno
Codogno
S. Quirico
Albareto
S. Vincenzo
Valdena
P.so d. Brattello
Bratto
P.so del Righedo
Cant.
Lago
Ballone
M. Càio
Canètolo
Sivizzo
Bellàsola
Menta
Pelosa
M. Zuccone
Crocetta di Tarsogno
Folla
Buzzò
Bràia
Gravagna
M. Borgognone
Bosco
Folta
M. Aguzzo
Mossale
Trevignano
M. Follano
Ventarola
Cento Croci
Groppo
Boschetto
M. Cucco o Borgallo
Guinadi
S. Rocco
Succisa (la Colla)
Monte-lungo
P.so Cirone
Sesta
Grammatica
P.so di Ticchiano
Zibana
Isola
Cassego
Scurtabò
M. Scassella
Montegroppo
M. Ribone
Monti
Ville Vècchia
Molinello
Prècchiola
Casarola
Riana
Mónchio
Vecciàtica
Comunéglia
Tagliefo
Squarci
Cervara
Gróndola
Groppodalósio
Cèsalina
Versola
M. Orsaro
Lagdei
Prato
Lugagnano
Caranza
M. Grezzano
Rif. Mariotti
L. Santo
M. Brusciól
Chiappozzo
Valletti
Varese Ligure
M. Spiaggi
Vignola
Bassone
Traverde
Mignegno
Arzèngio
Ceréfoli
M. Marmagna
M. Brusà
M. Naverf
Valditacca
Trefiumi
Rimagna
Valcieca
M. Focetto
T. Betigna
Pontrémoli
L. Scuro
Foce d. Tre Confini
Càdola
Dozzano
S. Annunziata
Ossegna
Càmpore
M. Gottero
Adelano
M. Volacra
Tècchia Rossa
Valle
Rocca Sigillina
Lusignana
M. Sillara
L. Bollena
Rigoso
Aneta
Miscoso
M. Porcile
S. Maria
Cembrano
Pizzolo
M. Coppa
Patigno
Torrano
Monte-tuscio
Càprio
Cavallana
Gigliana
Rif.
M. Malpasso
L. Verde
Maissana
Salterana
P.te Borsa
S. Pietro Vara
Còstola
Ometto
Castello
Noce
Zeri
Coloretta
Scorcetoli
Fornicella
Chiùsola
M. Bocco
M. Zenone
Tavarone
Salino
Arzelato
Castagnètoli
Tèglie
Filettiera
Corlaga
Valle
Linari
L. Paduli
P.so di Lagastrello
Piagna
Rossano
Antéssio
Busatica
Pozzo
Orturano
M. Alpe
Torza
Montale
Groppo
Rio
Pignona
M. Picchiara
Mulazzo
Mocrone
Bagnone
Taponecco
M. del Giogo
Bargone
Bosco di Rossano
Malgrate
Talavorno
Filetto
Virgoletta
Groppo
Pieve
Tavernelle
Campegli
Sant. Mad. d. Guardia
C. di Velva
Castello
Sesta Godano
S. Maria
Sasseta
M. Fiorito
Monteréggio
Gróppoli
P.te S. Giuseppe
Villafranca in Lunigiana
Castiglione
Grècciola
Busseto
Gabbiana
Varano
Prota
Comano
Sassalbo
Velva
Mola
Favarero
Carro
S. Margherita
Zignago
Pieve
I Casoni
Parana
Pieve di Casevoli
Canossa
Crespiano
Bottignana
Castiglione Chiav.
Bracco
M. Groppi
Zioni
Bergassana
Serò
Suvero
M. Cornoviglio
Villécchia
Merizzo
Bastia
Torre Nócciola
Cisigliana
Arlia
T. Rosaro
P.so d. Romiro
Saturnino
Comeglio
P.so d. Bracco
Mattarana
Cornice
Rocchetta di Vara
Veppo
Piazza
Villagrossa
Castello
Careggia
Tresana
Lusuolo
Fornoli
Licciana Nardi
Pieve di Monti
Pognana
Mezzema
Piazza
Carrodano Inf.
Bozzolo
M. Nero
Borseda
S. Maria
Cuccarello
Agnino
Galleria del Borgallo

31a

CHAPTER 6.

It was a small farm but with large outbuildings and we were welcomed warmly by the farmer's wife. In the house were several teen-age girls who were vastly intrigued by the arrival of two English officers; it was evident that we were the first who had come that way. At all events we were treated like rich uncles from the Antipodes, all hands set to roasting chestnuts as a preliminary to supper, the while asking where we had come from and where we were going. These two phrases in Italian were soon recognised by Buck, whose command of the language was weak in the extreme and he as quickly learned the appropriate replies.

In a short time, after the consumption of some red-hot chestnuts, we had apparently endeared ourselves to the household but we were somewhat puzzled as to where we would be able to sleep in view of the numbers in the house and the obvious lack of rooms to house them all. However after an excellent meal we were shewn into the best barn, provided with some rugs and left to ourselves.

During what passed for breakfast we discussed with the farmer's son the route we should take. He told us that the coast was only a matter of thirty or so miles over the hills to the south and strongly recommended us to go there as there would certainly be English submarines waiting to pick us up and moreover, many ex-prisoners had gone that way, he added. He was so insistent that, to pacify him, we said we would go that way. It was fortunate that we did not accept his advice since we found out later that the Germans in the coastal sector were particularly touchy about the presence of ex-prisoners in those parts and many had come to grief as a result.

So away we went, seemingly in the chosen direction but as this coincided for the moment with our plans to avoid the hated spot Borgotaro, it was all right. The going over farm tracks and through forest paths was easy so we made fast progress but when we had covered about nine miles the rain began to come down in torrents. It will be remembered that we only had the clothes we stood up in and no raincoats into the bargain so we had perforce to seek immediate shelter or be soaked. The only house in sight was a tiny dwelling across two fields and to this we hurried through the pelting rain.

A knock on the door brought out an aged Italian. Without a moment's hesitation he asked us in. Once inside we found ourselves in the tiniest inhabited dwelling in all Italy; there were two rooms each not more than eight by ten feet furnished only with a few poor sticks. But what the place lacked in size and wealth was more than compensated for by the amazing generosity of the husband and wife who lived there. They found some hot food

for us and we were invited to crowd in round the tiny fire to dry and warm ourselves.

It was obvious that we could not stay the night there as there was no barn or loft of any sort so when the rain eased off late in the afternoon we went on for another mile to a group of houses we could see across the fields. We found one to take us in without any trouble, given a good meal and then two matresses and blankets were brought out and put on the floor in the "spare room". When we had turned in Buck and I discussed the carefully laid plans we had made to avoid Borgotaro only to find ourselves sleeping within the proverbial stone-throw of the place. However we decided that we were safe enough as no Italians, other than those in the house had seen us arrive and in any case, it was highly improbable that any Germans would turn out on a pelting night on the off-chance of finding us so we went off to sleep with easy hearts.

The morning thankfully dawned fine and clear. A few hundred yards below the house we could plainly see the town with its railway station and German vehicles plying on the roads. The air was damp after the previous day's downpour but there was the promise of fine weather in the sky. Although our stomachs insistently began to call for food, by 8 a.m. there were no signs of anything forthcoming so we thought it best to be on our way and trust to finding a farm later to give us lunch.

This question of breakfast was one to which too little thought was given by too many Italians. Whether through lack of available food or the custom of the country, we often had to go without anything to eat between supper and lunch the following day. It was sometimes a severe trial especially when there was hard climbing to be done and supper the night before had consisted only of boiled chestnuts.

The first few miles were very hard going mainly up and down the steep sides of valleys which ran down into the main valley of the Taro River. At one stage we were seen off a farm by a vicious dog, then wading through a foaming mountain torrent to the amusement of an aged roadmender, a stiff walk through a chestnut forest brought us to the village of Belforte about ten miles down the river from Borgotaro. Belforte was a very old place hanging on the side of a steep hill in terraces with an air of sleepy mediaevalism. There were few people about but when we were in the centre of the village we came face to face with an old man sporting a huge walrus moustache who insisted that we have a meal at his house, just nearby.

This hospitable gentleman also gave us a great deal of news of progress of various friends of ours who had passed through and then insisted that we stay there the night. This plan we fell in with, rather against our better

judgment as we were wasting good walking time but we were more tired by our energetic morning sans breakfast than we realised.

The next morning, the 21st October, we were on the road at 7 a.m. after an excellent breakfast and found the going fairly strenuous along a rough mule track along the tops of the ridges which led us to the tiny village of Corchia. As we walked through the village we were warned that there were Germans about but took it for one of the usual rumours though further investigation shewed that this was indeed true so we had to circumnavigate the place via the backs of houses and through the gardens. We could hear the words "Tedeschi" and "Tedeschi vengono" (The Germans are coming) being shouted by the villagers; but, though there was no sign of any Germans we were amused by the sight of many of the younger men-folk dashing from the houses for the cover of the surrounding woods. Buck and I, carefully tracking in the opposite direction from that generally taken by the fugitives, were soon safely hidden in the depths of a wood where we sat down to recover our breath.

Though we had not seen any Germans, it was indeed very likely that there was a small party making one of the periodical sweeps or "rastrellamenti" as the Italians called them, in an attempt to enrol some "voluntary" labour for the Todt Organisation. This German Labour Corps was, at this time, sadly lacking in numbers and urgently needed recruits, the more so as the Germans were then in the process of building lines of fortifications along the southern slopes of the Appennines and the many large and lurid posters affixed to walls were apparently having the opposite effect to that intended. In fact, it would appear that when these posters were shewn in a particular neighbourhood, it was taken as a warning by the Italians to be on their guard.

Voluntary enlistment being unable to cope with the heavy demand, the Germans were thrown back on less attractive measures and on such occasions as the one described, unless the inhabitants of a village were caught napping (a thing that seldom occurred), all the able-bodied males scattered faster than rabbits to the safety of the adjoining countryside till the search-party gave up in disgust.

The noise and excitement having died away, we went on our way through the village of Valbona, recovering from the "rastrellamento" which had descended on it before it came to Corchia. Our route was a rough mule path going in the direction of the main Parma-Spezia road, an artery much used by German transport; this we crossed without danger after a careful reconnaissance had been made and we sheered off in the bushes towards a small farm, earmarked as our lunch-provider.

At the outset, the farmer's wife obviously summed us up as the Italian

equivalent of good-for-nothings and would have sent us away with nothing in our hands and a flea in our respective ears. She pleaded that the farm could not even support her husband and herself adequately, let alone produce meals for any Tom, Dick or Harry who should chance along. However, I told her that we were British Officers on our way to the Allied lines, that we only wanted a bitefor lunch and that we would be on our way immediately. She eventually relented when she saw that she would have to "buy" us off and went indoors to produce a brown loaf, saying that was all she could spare.

Not much to walk twenty mountainous miles on but it was take-it-or leave-it and there was no other house in sight so Buck and I retired out of sight of the road and sitting down in the lee of a large bush, proceeded to tackle the loaf. The first mouthful tasted as splendid as it looked, we thought we were on to a good thing; the second was all right but a bit heavy and all the others after that were sheer purgatory. But it was either the loaf or nothing and we were famished. However, thereafter we always fought shy of bread made with chestnut flour especially when there was no liquid available to wash it down. So, there we sat on a bare hillside in the Appennines, munching a heavy, sodden, chestnut-flour loaf with a dismal wind driving through our clothes recently soaked with the sweat from a hard climb. Below us in the valley there were some children playing in the bushes but they were the only signs of life in an otherwise bleak and empty world of rolling hills.

The last crust defeated us so, throwing it away with a soldier's oath, we rose to our feet and were on our way. At this stage we had no idea where to make for beyond the general line of the mountains wherein we considered lay our safety from recapture. Down the hillside a thousand feet then up the one opposite; three hundred feet, four hundred feet and we came into the edges of a small forest. The weather had now begun to turn cold and soon the first flakes of snow were falling but still we pressed upwards as there was no sign of any house where we could stay and it was our motto never to retrace our steps - always go on.

We came out of the trees in a couple of hundred feet and saw the top of the ridge ahead where the path opened out into a smooth green pasture. The snow was now swirling thickly causing us to wonder whether the fine conditions were coming to an end and whether we should be able to make much more progress southwards. These ruminations were cut short by meeting with a lone Italian coming in the opposite direction. I asked him whether there was a village anywhere near to which he answered that we should find one "a little" way along the path. I confess that I was dubious since we were some four thousand feet up and the countryside all around was bare, bleak and wild. However I

was soon to be confounded when we came upon a somewhat primitive farm on the outskirts of the hill-village of Roccaferrara.

Cold, wet and hungry we banged on the doors of this stone-walled cottage. The woman who opened the door first tried to send us away but I could not fully make out what she was saying in her peculiar dialect. I eventually inferred that the farmer was not yet home and that we should have to wait. This we did, sitting on a pile of faggots in a corner out of the wind while being watched by inquisitive Italian children. When we had been there for more than an hour and were on the verge of moving on to more hospitable fields, the farmer appeared and, on hearing who and what we were, took us in to the warmth inside. Before going in, we took a good look at the valley lying beneath us in the gathering dusk. There on the right was a main road and a power station, places to be avoided while away to the left we could just make out a broad river and a big bridge crossing over; that was our way for the morning, we said to ourselves.

Little need be said of that evening beyond recording the excellence of the supper which concluded with fried eggs and the warm, snug loft whither we repaired with rugs to sleep while the wind moaned and whispered through the cracks in the walls.

In contrast to the bleak evening, the following day dawned fine and clear with the promise of heat later on. We were given an adequate breakfast, for a change and were on the road by 7.30. The "road" was the mule track of the night before, a rough pebbled way with an incline of 1 in 3 downhill as far as the eye could see. We had not gone many yards before we entered the village proper of Roccaferrara and could see what a remarkable place it was.

Picture a small group of two-storey houses with grey stone walls and grey slate roofs stacked against the side of a mountain of precipitous steepness. It was a mystery to me how some of the houses did not slide down into the river tumbling along its stony bed a thousand feet below. It was a piece of Italy, the old Italy unchanged for several hundred years where the peasants still wrung a meagre living from a barren land, tending their flocks on the bare hillsides across which unchecked the wild storms of winter would sweep and the scented summer breezes with the changing seasons. The next town or village must have been some hours hard walk away.

Fascinated as we were by the picturesque village, Buck and I hurried on our way while the going was downhill and we were fresh. Soon we came to the approaches of the bridge, it was quite a formidable affair and should surely have had a guard of some sort. However, inspection proved that either there was none or if there was, our early start had beaten the guard to its post; so, after a final check that there was no sign of guards or

traffic, we stepped hurriedly over the bridge and the River Parma. Then hurrying for a couple of miles through woodland tracks we came at length to a road which soon led into a village where we succeeded in getting something to eat.

On again and over another ridge. The countryside had changed to shew an aspect much less forbidding though still wild. There was a tangled mass of green hills marching into the distance, crowned by the pyramidal bulk of Monte Cimone, at some 6,800 feet the highest peak in the northern chain of the Appennines. Soon we were passing through Autognola along a main road going through to La Spezia; this I did not like as we had seen German trucks from a distance before we struck the road.

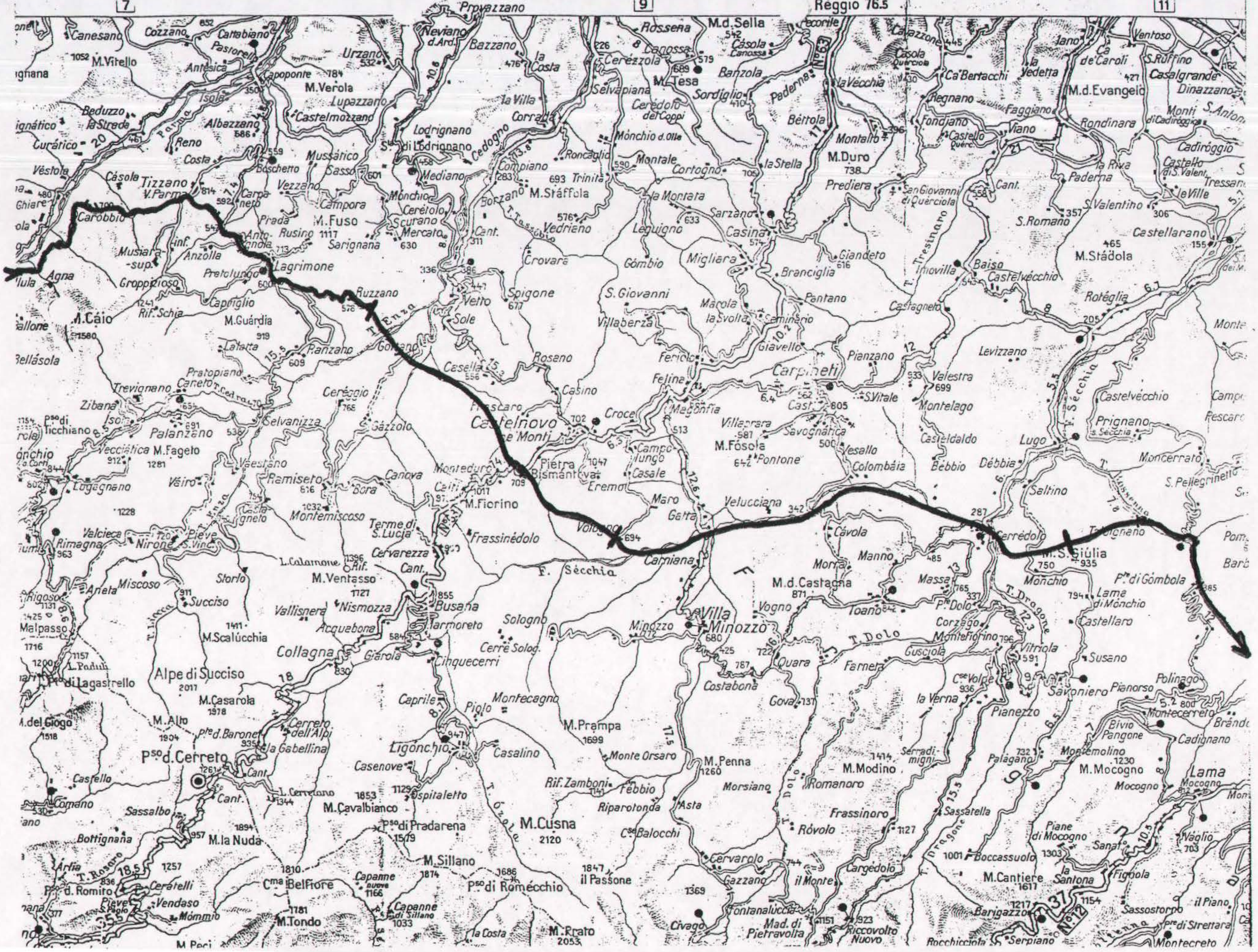
In case it may seem that we were unnaturally careful over taking to the main roads, it must be explained that, at this juncture of the war in Italy there were very, very few young, able-bodied males to be seen on foot especially during normal working hours. It would therefore need no great amount of initiative for an alert German to decide that persons such as ourselves were suspicious and if we had been stopped the chances of our bluffing it out would have been slight.

As the valley down which we were walking was rather narrow and as it was possible to spot an approaching vehicle by its dust cloud some time before we met it, we decided to take a chance of making fast progress along the road. In two or three miles we spied a small village away to the left on a side road; this looked inviting to two tired, hot and hungry travellers so we made towards it. When we were nearly there we fell in with a group of village wives on their way home from the fields and asked whether any of them could give us lodging, explaining who and what we were. They appeared to be very impressed in spite of our ragged appearance and talked excitedly among themselves in a patois that was too rapid for me to understand.

Upon arrival in the village by name Ruzzano, a little cluster of grey stone buildings around a small piazza with a fountain in the centre, we were told to wait. So Buck and I subsided gratefully on the rim of the fountain's basin and in no time at all people came pouring from all directions and the hubbub of talk filled the warm evening air. We found ourselves the centre of rapt attention while we told those nearest us about ourselves; precious cigarettes made their appearance and we begged some from those who were lucky enough to have them.

At the end of an hour we were still sitting on the fountain and still our supper seemed as far away as it ever was. The crowd began to thin out as the audience lost interest or thought their own dinners might be waiting so in the end I took the bull by the horns and asked a man if he knew who

37a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Provazzano
Reggio 76.5
M.d.Sella
Rossena
Canossa
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la Costa
Cozzano
Canesano
Cattabiano
Pastorello
Urzano
M.Vitello
Antesica
Capoponte
M.Verola
Lupazzano
Castelmozzano
Beduzzo
la Strada
Albazzano
Curático
Reno
Costa
Véstola
Cásola
Tizzano V.Parma
Carobbio
Musiara-sup.
Anzolla
Pretolungo
Lagrimone
Agna
Groppizioso
Capriglio
M.Cáio
M.Guárdia
Ruzzano
Rif. Schia
Lalatta
Ranzano
Pratopiano
Trevignano
Caneto
Zibana
Palanzano
Ticchiano
Selvanizza
Vecciatica
M.Fagelo
Vaestano
Ramiseto
Lugagnano
Valcieca
Rimagna
Nirone
Pieve S.Vinc.
Miscoso
Succiso
Rigoso
Malpasso
M.Scalúcchia
Alpe di Succiso
P.so di Lagastrello
M.Casarola
M.Alto
M.del Giogo
P.so d.Cerreto
Castello
Comano
Sassalbo
Bottignana
M.la Nuda
P.so d. Romito
Ceratelli
Vendaso
Mommio
M.Peci
Lodrignano
Cedogno
Mediano
Mussático
Sasso
Boschetto
Vezzano
Campora
M.Fuso
Prada
Rusino
Sarignana
Monchio
Cerétolo
Scurano
Mercato
Compiano
Borzano
M.Sfáffola
Trinità
Vedriano
Crovara
Spigone
Vetto
Sole
Rosseno
Casella
Gottano
T. Enza
Cerréggio
Gazzolo
Frascaro
Castelnovo ne' Monti
Croce
Casino
Pietra Bismantova
Eremo
Canova
Bora
Monteduro
Cagnola
M.Fiorino
Montemiscoso
Terme di S.Lucia
Frassinédolo
Cervarezza
Cant.
M.Ventasso
Nismozza
Vallisnera
Busana
Acquebona
Tarmoreto
Collagna
Giarola
Cinquecerri
Sologno
Cerré Sologn.
Caprile
Piolo
Montecagno
M.Prampa
Ligonchio
Casalino
Casenove
Ospitaletto
M.Cavalbianco
P.so di Pradarena
M.Cusna
M.Sillano
Cima Belfiore
P.so di Romécchio
M.Tondo
M.Prato
Monte Orsaro
Rif.Zamboni
Febbio
Riparotonda
C.se Balocchi
il Passone
Civago
Fontanaluccia
Mad. di Pietravolta
Riccovolto Nuovo
F. Sécchia
Volo
Carniana
Villa Minozzo
Minozzo
Costabona
Quara
Gova
M.Penna
Morsiano
Asta
Cervarolo
Gazzano
il Monte
M.Modino
Romanoro
Frassinoro
Róvolo
Cargédolo
Sassatella
Massa
Toano
M.d.Castagna
Morra
Manno
Cávola
Velucciana
Gatta
Maro
Casale
Campolungo
Felina
Febio
Megonfia
Carpineti
Villaprara
M.Fósola
Savognatica
Pontone
Colombáia
Vesallo
Pianzano
Gavello
Seminario
Marola
la Svolta
Villaberza
S.Giovanni
Gómbio
Migliara
Branciglia
Pantano
Leguigno
Casina
Sarzano
la Montata
Móntale
Cortogno
Mónchio d.Olle
Roncaglio
Ceredolo dei Coppi
Selvapiana
M.Tesa
Banzola
Sordiglio
Paderna
la Vecchia
Bértola
Montalto
M.Duro
la Stella
Prediera
Giandeto
Castagneto
Valestra
Montelago
Castelvécchio
Prignano
Castéldaldo
Lugo
Bebbio
Débbia
Saltino
Moncerrato
S.Pellegrinetto
Cerrédolo
M.S.Giúlia
Tolignano
Mónchio
P.te di Gómbola
Lame di Mónchio
Castellaro
Susano
Savoniero
Pianorso
Polinago
Montecerreto
Brando
Cadignano
Bivio Pangone
Montemolino
M.Mocogno
Mocogno
Lama Mocogno
Pianezzo
la Verna
Palagano
Farneta
Gusciola
Vitriola
Montefiorino
Corzago
P.te Dolo
T. Dolo
T. Dragone
Piane di Mocogno
Sanato
Vaglio
Boccassuolo
M.Cantiere
la Santona
Figgola
Barigazzo
Sassostorno
P.so di Strettara
Montecreto
il Piano
Serpiano
Rocchicciola
Levizzano
Baiso
Castelvécchio
Roteglia
Viano
Castello Querc.
Fondiano
Regnano
Faggiano
Ca' Bertacchi
la Vedetta
Ca' de Caroli
S.Ruffino
Casalgrande
Dinazzano
M.d.Evangelo
Rondinara
Monti di Cadiroggio
Cadiróggio
Castello di S.Valent.
Tressano
le Ville
la Riva
Paderna
S.Valentino
S.Romano
Castellarano
M.Stádola
Ventoso
Iano
Casola Querciola
San Giovanni di Querciola
T. Tresinaro
Viano
Cavazzone
Ca' Manno
Tressano
N°63
N°12
37

was having the honour of entertaining us for the night being under the impression that it had all been settled long before. He told me however that, in typical Italian fashion, nothing had been arranged but suggested that we might try the large house at the corner of the piazza where some gentry lived who would doubtless be delighted to accommodate English Officers.

Walking across to the fine-looking house, we pulled the bellrope and awaited results. Nothing occurred for some moments so I peered in through an open window and then saw a small girl of about eight years peeping round the corner of the door. When she saw us she gave a little shriek. From somewhere inside her mother called, asking what was the matter. I then told the girl who we were and what we wanted. Mother then put in an appearance and from the safety of the inner doorway told us that the house was full and recommended us to try one of the village houses. And so, giving the Italian upper classes the benefit of our anger, we strode off up the street and found that the first house we tried would oblige.

The upper part of the village consisted of a few quite substantial stone-built farm houses around a rough square and it was at the stout wooden door of one of these that we knocked. In a few moments it was opened by a pleasant-faced farmer of middle age. We explained who we were asking if we could have board and lodging for the night and we were then invited in by this friendly character, finding ourselves immediately in a large room, simply furnished with a large table opposite, across the main window.

Having wlecomed us, our host excused himself briefly saying he must prepare the supper - no wife being in evidence he appeared to be on his own. Supper, a huge bowl of steaming minestra, was soon on the table, the savoury smell whetting the already ravenous appetites of the two famished and weary travellers. We were sitting in the spacious living room with its grey roughly-finished stone walls, at the commodious oak table giving our undivided attention to the immediate needs when there was a sharp knock on the door. Our host went to open it and then came back to tell me that there was someone outside who wished to speak with us; I was somewhat apprehensive of the invisible visitor but nevertheless I told him to bring him in.

The door opened to reveal a tall, fair-haired and handsome young man dressed quite smartly in a well-cut plus four suiting. He came striding across the room, holding out his hand:
"How are you? I must apologise for coming at this time but I have been out all day and only just got back," he said in perfect English.

To say we were surprised would be a massive understatement and Buck and I looked at each other in amazement - after a few seconds pause, I said "That is quite all right. We had a certain amount of trouble finding accommodation but

this farmer kindly took us in when we were turned away from the big house in the square."

"You were turned away", he said "from the big house?"

"Yes", I replied.

"That is where I live", he said, "When I got in they told me that a couple of tramps had called asking for lodging and my mother, not liking the look of them, turned them away. We have many tramps around nowadays", he added.

I then told him all about ourselves, what we were doing in these awful clothes whereupon he offered his sincere apologies and said he would try to find us other lodgings if these would not do. I said that we were satisfied and would be leaving early in the morning. To our questions as to his perfect command of the English language, he explained that his father was Italian but his Mother was English and that he had been educated mostly in England.

"As a matter of fact", he said, "I'm Old Merchant Taylors."

He had made up his mind on his return to Italy in 1940 that he would never fight against the country of his upbringing so had spent the next three years in avoiding a call up by living in this remote village, a tiny backwater compared with his beloved London but apparently conveniently forgotten by the authorities.

He went with a warm goodbye and best wishes for the success of our venture whereupon we set upon the remains of the meal and departed to our rest among the cows to share the warmth of the byre.

Leaving Ruzzano the following morning at 8 a.m. after an excellent breakfast and our heartfelt thanks to our host we made our way by field paths down to the River Enza, a broad straggly and shallow stream running northwards out of the hills. As there was no bridge anywhere within sight, off came our boots and socks and over we went, paddling through the tawny water beneath a grilling sun and a deep blue sky.

Nowhere was the water deeper than the knees and when we attained the far bank we sat awhile in the sunshine considering the prospect. The countryside which had somewhat broadened out, had suddenly become reminiscent of the western highlands of Scotland with the heather on the hills but the river was, perhaps a shade too wide to fit in with the picture. Then, setting our feet again to the path, we began climbing steeply out of the valley of the Enza. The gradient was deceptive so that when we came out on the top of the ridge, we were hot and very weary; before us there was the main road which we safely crossed and struck out over the fields in the direction of a small village we could see about a mile away. Some two miles to our left was the sizeable town of Castelnovo, no doubt filled with lurking Germans.

In a quarter of an hour we were in the village which we had seen from the road, it was called Costa di Grasso where we received what must be an almost

unique welcome. It was another typical little Italian mountain village with a dozen or so stone houses scattered roughly around a grassy square. We were seized by the first housewife who saw us and, when she was told who we were, she called to all the neighbours to come along. Inside her house we sat down while she told her friends to go home and come back each with some item of food or drink.

Away they sped, chattering like a flock of starlings, leaving the room strangely quiet. But in less time than the telling takes they were all back again; one had an egg, another some rashers of bacon, another potatoes and bread and so on. Our hostess fussed over us like long-lost sons; soon there was a marvellous smell of frying and then two laden plates were placed before us. Her kindness was very touching and when we had finished she pressed us to stay for a day or so but, bearing in mind the nearness of Castelnovo, we said we must go further and thanking her profusely, we departed.

CHAPTER 7.

IN WHICH WE HAVE A BATH.

Again the scenery had changed; the dark green hills were wearing their autumn patches of red-gold finery and still there was the beautiful shape of Monte Cimone to the south-east beckoning us. It had become another landmark to us, another Rubicon to be crossed. Perhaps because it was visible from so great a distance, because it was so finely proportioned in our eyes that it became one of the key points on our journey. Before we reached it, it was in view for five days' march and over our shoulders after we had passed it, it could be seen for another four days so that from the time when we first saw it to when it disappeared from sight we had covered nearly one hundred miles as the army boot tramped.

The sun shone from a brilliant blue Italian sky as, half an hour later, we strode into the remote and rural village of Vologno and into another extraordinary episode. The first house we tried proved hospitably inclined and its owner, a young Italian named Alfonso Germini, came out to bid us welcome even before he knew who we were.

Almost without asking us, he seemed to expect that we should stay with him so in we went to meet his wife. He had not long ago returned, like one from the dead, from the wreck of the Italian 8th Army on the Russian Front where he had been serving in one of the Regiments of Alpini. He was pathetically glad to be home and his wife no less pathetically glad to have him back for they were a young couple, barely on the threshold of life.

Later in the evening I extracted from him some of the details of his experiences. He related how they had gone to war against the Russians without the least knowledge of what to expect. It seems that the Staff was equally at a loss for the troops had been ill-provided with warm clothes to ward off the chill blasts of the Eastern winter. They shivered and froze in their inadequate equipment while the Germans were clad in furs and leather, laughing at them in their discomfort.

He told us that he had been on a very quiet sector when the storm broke. One moment there was hardly a war on then the next thing they knew was a wild herd of German troops bursting upon them in their helter-skelter to get away from the Russians. The columns of German lorries rushing to the rear would not stop for the Italians and he saw with his own eyes Germans cutting off with their bayonets the fingers of Italian soldiers who had jumped up and taken hold of the sides of the lorries. There were other tales, too long and rambling to be worth the telling but to give an idea of the fearful casualties suffered by this Italian Army, the official figures may be quoted. They admitted to losses of somewhere about 115,000 in the course of a few weeks

fighting. Thus, out of an original strength of some 120,000 men, only about 5000 came home after the winter battles of 1942/43 when the Italian 8th Army was told it was no longer wanted to assist its Teutonic ally on the Eastern Front.

We discussed our plans with Alfonso and asked whether we might stay a couple of nights in order to rest up after the previous strenuous week, to which he enthusiastically agreed. Just then there was a knock on the door and several youthful well set-up Italians came in each bearing one or more bottles of wine. They introduced themselves as Alfonso's friends of his late-lamented army days who had also demobilised themselves on the 8th September. The word had got round the village that there were two English Officers in Alfonso's house and they could not resist the temptation to see what we looked like.

Thinking over the question of this remarkable welcome after a period for reflection, I inclined to the view that we were probably the first of the Allied ex-prisoners to visit Vologno though they were no doubt equally curious to see what their late enemies were like and to talk to people from a strange country for they began to put the queerest questions to us till we were being bombarded from all directions. The bottles of wine, red and sparkling, a very palatable brew were soon opened and passed round as were the cigarettes and in no time at all a first-class fug had been created.

No one could ever brand these young Italians as being indolent in the search for knowledge. For at least two hours until supper was ready we had to answer a barrage of questions ranging from where we had been taken prisoners to politics, from the war situation and its prospects to propaganda. While on the latter subject, we had the greatest difficulty in dissuading them of the Fascist story that all English people had five meals per day and were thus grossly overfed. It was only after much thought that we realised that Mussolini and his henchmen had been including elevenses and afternoon tea among the principal meals of the day to make up the number to five. As at least one of the party would not believe the particular answer to any one question, there would always be a gasp of surprise followed by a gust of laughter from the others.

They were the greatest good company and without a doubt it did Buck and me a world of good to listen to such jollity. Then our host came in from the fields and for another few minutes before supper there was even more jollity; tales of how they had scored off the Germans were told and promptly capped. The wine passed back and forth and the air grew blue with the smoke of cigars and cigarettes. One of them recalled that there was to be a dance that evening in Castelnovo and thought it would be a wonderful idea to take us,

partly no doubt to shew us off to score over the neighbouring villages but, as it was sleep we needed more than high-jinks, we declined and said we would look after the house if Alfonso and his wife wanted to partake.

Signora Germini produced a grand supper when the lads had at long last taken their leave and soon they too departed for the great dance after making a last effort to persuade us to accompany them but without success. Buck and I were left to our own devices and we spent a few minutes sitting before the fire, staring into the flickering tongues of flame. The room was strangely quiet after the hubbub of the afternoon and the hard outlines of the poor but clean furniture were softened by the firelight. Our bed was a large mattress in one corner of the room to which we soon repaired and in no time were fast asleep, the end of one of the most eventful, extraordinary and colourful days since we left the camp.

We were woken betimes by Alfonso busying himself about the house and when we sat down to breakfast, we were given the news of the dance. It seemed to have been a great success. Alfonso had met his landlord who had expressed a wish to pay us a visit; he also told us that there had been a German soldier there and it was a great pity that we had not gone too. He was greatly intrigued with the thought of what might have taken place but we were glad as there would have certainly been trouble, both for ourselves and for Alfonso if we had been identified.

It was Sunday the 24th October. The sun was shining brilliantly and the air was warm which augured well for the bath and clothes-washing session that Buck and I had promised ourselves but before we went down to the river, I asked Alfonso if there was a barber in the village. He said there was and led me there; it was only a few yards walk round the corner. The barber apparently made this Sunday an exception and when he had shorn my lengthy locks, would not take anything in payment. Buck and I both had a couple of hundred lira but these we kept up our sleeves in case a real emergency might arise when they might come in handy.

The barber having done his stuff, away down to the river we went with our towels and some borrowed soap. It was the Secchia that ran in the valley a few hundred yards down the hill from Vologno, a broad but shallow stream except when there had been heavy rain or the snow was melting. We found a secluded spot by a little channel where the water ran some four feet deep and settled down to do the washing. First on the agenda were our "smalls" and when they were as clean as river water and Italian ersatz soap might get them, they were hung amongst the sedges to dry while their owners took their bath. The water was just not cold enough to be unbearable; having soaped ourselves, there we sat in the muddied stream up to our necks in the water. Some of the dye from my shirt and trousers had run with my sweat and, try as I might, I could not

entirely obliterate the delicate blue and brown streaky effects on various parts of my skin.

Two hours later, our washing having dried quickly in the hot sun, we were back in Alfonso's house to find his landlord there already, complete with two bottles of wine for us. He was a smallish man, neatly dressed in riding clothes but he did not seem to be quite as impressed by our appearance as we anticipated, bearing in mind how anxious Alfonso had been for us to meet him, perhaps he had expected us to be in uniform. However he was affable in his own way and after some minutes of polite conversation, departed.

Alfonso's wife rose to the occasion with the dinner; roast fowl with the full etceteras washed down with the landlord's wine and finished off with a cigarette. We had hardly done justice to the meal when there was a banging on the door and in trooped the party who had entertained us for so long the previous afternoon. Again they were loaded to the scuppers with wine, several bottles of which were promptly opened for immediate consumption.

We must have created something of a stir in the village as the original party was swollen by several others and we were put through a similar inquisition to the one we suffered on the previous day. The whole crowd rapidly became very noisy and talkative and the air thick with smoke while Buck and I grew more and more drowsy under the influence of the unaccustomed quantity of wine. After a couple of hours of excited chatter they all dispersed for their suppers but, to our dismay all returned afterwards with yet more wine which had to be consumed. When they finally called it a day, we were heartily grateful for the sudden peace which descended on the house and gave respite to our wine-fuddled brains. Talking over the events of the day when we had retired to our mattress for the night, we voted that Alfonso and his wife were the best hosts we had come across and that this was the best billet we would be likely to strike.

Came the dawn and at breakfast Alfonso tried to persuade us to stay a little longer. We were sorely tempted to take full advantage of the warmth of welcome given by the villagers but the necessity of attempting to get home tilted the scales. Looking back on things, we could never get over the kindness with which we had been received and only wished that we could have done something, however little, to reward them. The spontaneous enthusiasm which greeted us was something we could not easily forget.

CHAPTER 8.

CHESTNUTS AGAIN AND ANOTHER GOOD BILLET.

Therefore, bidding farewell to Alfonso and his wife and putting our luggage in our pockets, we departed before half past eight. Down to the river, where we had bathed the day before and across by paddling we went. Having gained the other side, we set our course along the banks of the river, sometimes going actually along the gravel bed where we made fast progress until we came to the village of Cerredolo where we crossed the River Dolo at its confluence with the Secchia. It was more than ten miles to this point and we had covered it in not much more than two and a half hours.

On the other side of the Dolo, there rose a steep hill up which we bent our steps and, after a hard climb, reached the tiny village of Cassano when we called it a day. Having no reliable map, it was difficult to hold an accurate course unless we travelled on a line to some natural feature; we still were using Monte Cimone as our aiming point and this caused us to take hills and valleys in our stride.

Cassano was the usual collection of grey stone cottages, perched on the side of a hill, near the summit. Being on the edge of a chestnut forest it was damp; moss covered the roofs and the fallen leaves and husks littered the paths between the houses. Autumnal mist wreathed round the walls as we sought out a lodging and we had to try several houses before we were taken in by a very poor woman with several children. She was a person of few words and probably a war widow but she agreed after considerable argument to look after us for the night.

Buck summed up the situation in the words "Back to the chestnut country again and hard tack". Sure enough, it was upon these delicacies that we were fed; a steamy mass of boiled nuts was placed before us and we had to make the best of a bad job. They were very heavy going and unappetising in the extreme but it was nuts or nothing. A poor evening meal was a drawback since we normally banked upon one substantial feed of the day. All the household partook of the mess even the very young children and then we were shewn to a cold and draughty barn with only some damp straw for the night.

The morrow, the 26th October, was damp and misty. By eight o'clock there was no sign of any food, not even any chestnuts so Buck suggested we cut our losses, waste no more time and get on the road. This we did and left Cassano, not greatly pleased with our "hotel", by a path which soon grew into a road and this we followed for an hour till we came to a farm where we begged some bread and cheese to sustain our flagging energies. This eaten, we were away

once more following a good but lonely road winding along the banks of a small river till we came to a small village where we decided to spend some of our precious lire in the store on some cigarettes.

Here we left the road and struck off in the direction of Pavullo by mule tracks. For a couple of miles the scenery was very picturesque, the track roughly paved with cobbles climbing up along the side of a narrow gorge, overhung with giant chestnuts and bordered with close thickets. On our right, at the bottom of the gorge ran a small stream gurgling and splashing over the granite boulders with which its path was plentifully sprinkled. Every now and then we would meet a peasant with one or two mules laden with bags of wheat going to the mill or we would overtake a train of similarly laden animals going back to the villages with flour and other provisions.

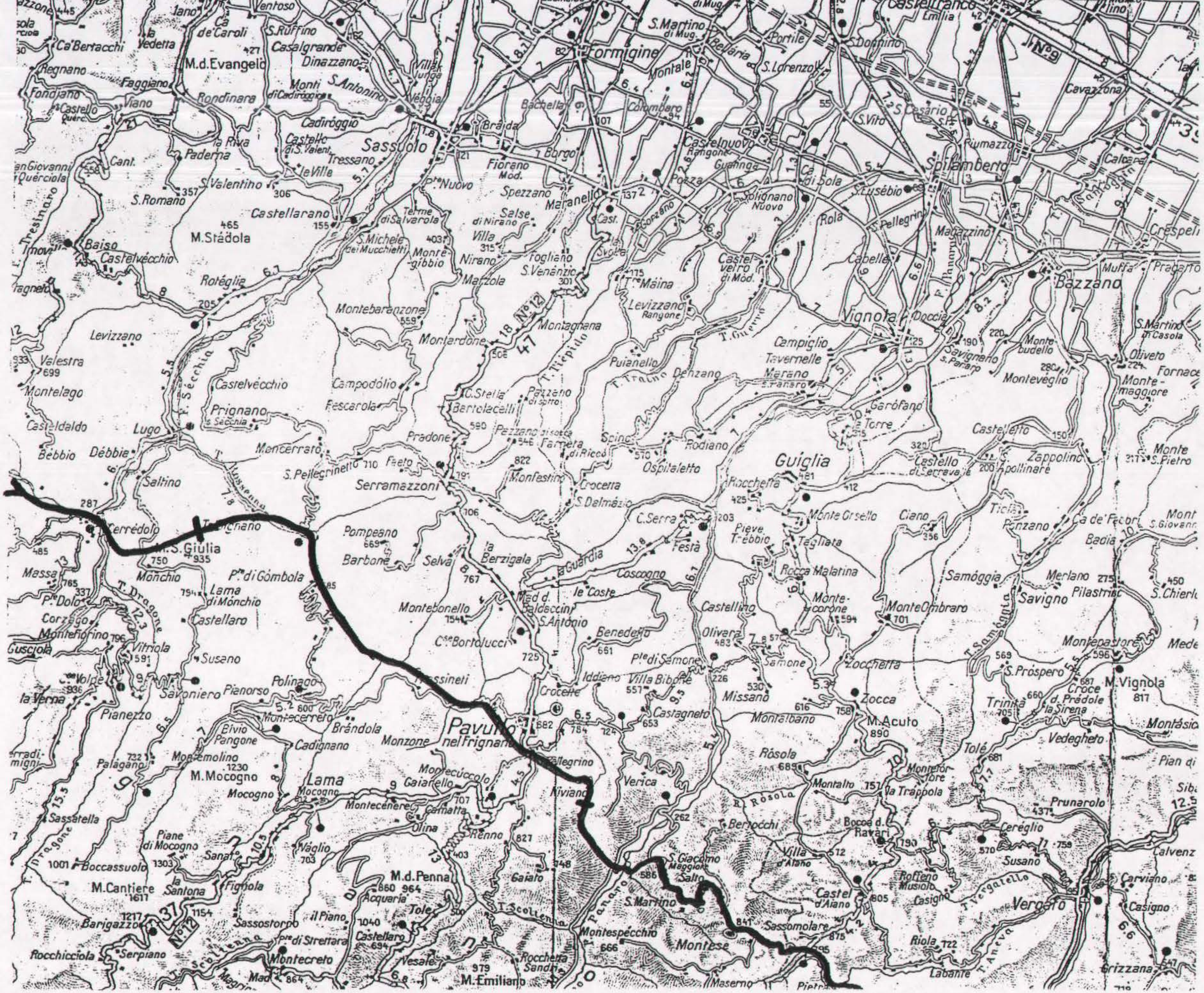
In a short while, when the sun had fully dispersed the morning mists, we came out into the open where there were meadows and thickets of brushwood, already being thinned by the locals for winter fuel. We passed one or two villages or, more accurately, small clusters of houses where hardy hill peasants wrung a living of some sort from the thin soil, preferring the impoverished freedom of the mountains to the hustle and bustle artificiality of the towns and cities. Then, very suddenly, we came upon the outskirts of Pavullo. It had all the appearance of being quite an important centre so caution was obviously required and when we came over the brow of a low hill and saw an aerodrome before us, we sat down in the cover of some trees and spied out the land.

To our left lay the town, a compact cluster of large buildings with red roofs, two or three churches and what we took for a hospital with red crosses on the tiles. Just below us on our right was the aerodrome, a small grass landing field with wartime hangars and a couple of light German aircraft neatly parked. There were some vehicles about also a few Germans, a place to be given a wide berth. Across the centre of the shallow valley ran a main road going from Modena to Leghorn and carrying military traffic.

We noticed a small track going straight from where we were sitting between the town and the airfield, so leaving the shelter of the woods, we set foot upon it. It chanced that there was an Italian leading a small mule train along this path so we joined up with him in order to attract less attention and in a few minutes were past the aerodrome and over the road. Again it may have seemed that we were unduly careful, but we felt that, with a virtual price on our heads, it was much better to be safe than sorry and was good training into the bargain. It must also be remembered that it was unusual in the extreme at that stage of the war to see young men of military age on the road and, if the Germans saw any such, they were liable to stop and ask awkward questions.

When we reached the safety of the other side of the road, we thanked our

46a



Formigine
Sassuolo
Fiorano Mod.
Maranello
Castelnuovo Rangone
Spilamberto
Vignola
Bazzano
Castelvetro di Mod.
Castellarano
M. Stádola
Baiso
Castelvécchio
Roteglia
Montebaranzone
Levizzano
Valestra
Montelago
Prignano s. Sécchia
Lugo
Débbie
Castelvécchio
Campodólio
Fescarola
Pradone
Serramazzoni
Moncerrato
S. Pellegrinetto
Faeto
Montagnana
Pompeano
Barbone
Selva
la Berzigala
Guiglia
Rocchetta
Monte Orsello
Tagliata
Rocca Malatina
Castellino
Montecorone
Monte Ombraro
Zocca
M. Acuto
Montalbano
Rósola
Pavullo nel Frignano
Montecúccolo
Lama Mocogno
M. Mocogno
Montecenere
Vaglio
M.d. Penna
Acquaria
Montecreto
Sestola
M. Emiliano
Montese
Castel d'Aiano
Vergato
Savigno
Monteveglio
Castello di Serravalle
Zappolino
Samóggia
Tolé
M. Vignola
Grizzana
Cerredolo
M. S. Giulia
Monchio
Lama di Monchio
Castellaro
Susano
Savoniero
Polinago
Brándola
Cadignano
Monzone
Sassostorno
Barigazzo
Rocchicciola
Frassinoro
Piandelagotti
Marano
Campiglio
Tavernelle
Garófano
Ospitaletto
Rodiano
Crocetta
S. Dalmázio
Montefestino
Festà
Coscogno
le Coste
S. Antonio
Benedello
Iddiano
Villa Bibone
Castagneto
Missano
Montalto
la Trappola
Prunarolo
Cereglio
Susano
Carviano
Casigno
Riola
Labante

companion and turned off down a bridle path. Some twenty minutes later we again came out on a side road and who should appear round the corner but our friend with his mules. It was than getting on towards evening so we asked if he knew of a house where we would be welcome for the night. He said there were plenty thereabouts and, coming round another bend in the road, we saw below us a deep, narrow valley with some scattered farms. He pointed out one to us which he recommended and, bidding him farewell again, we turned off down the track to that farm.

It was a large, well built and prosperous-looking establishment and when we went to the door, the usual bevy of females poured out. The farmer appeared, a youngish man, who on hearing who we were, bade us come in forthwith. He ushered us into the living room and told me, in Italian, that he was taking lessons in English from a girl who lived in the next farm as he planned to emigrate to England or America when the war ended and asked whether he might practise his newly-acquired language on us. His first essay was "Well boys, what will you have to drink!" - a good start.

Supper was nearly ready but before it was served he suggested sending for his teacher as we might be interested to meet her and he also said there were others who were very anxious to meet an Englishman as it seemed that we were the first to penetrate to those parts. I said that we would not like to offend these good folk but would prefer to remain unknown in view of the proximity of Pavullo where there were Germans and the word might easily get round that we were there for the picking up. As night was drawing on fast, he agreed and supper was then served.

The entire company then took their places at the table, there must have been quite a dozen, and soon there was a buzz of conversation rising to the rafters of the big fire-lit room. It was an excellent meal of the usual pasta, but with plenty of delicious vegetables and all piping hot though we would have preferred the inquisition to have taken place after we had done justice to the food. After the opening gambit of where we had come from and where we were going, we branched off into family details.

"Are you married". "No".

"Are your parents alive and where do they live?"

"How old are you."

"What regiment are you in?"

"Are you really OFFICERS?"

"Did you belong to the marvellous 8th Army?"

"Where were you captured?"

On and on went the questions until we felt almost dizzy and finally sought escape by pleading that we were very tired and must go to bed. The farmer

explained that he did not have any spare bedroom, so would we mind sleeping in the cowshed? "I can let you have plenty of rugs," he added as though ashamed of letting his guests sleep with the cows.

So, out came the women laden with pillows and rugs and we were shewn into the cowshed. It was beautifully warm inside. The cows stood placidly in their stalls, turning now and then an inquiring head to see what all the fuss was about. Then finally we were left alone among a young mountain of pillows and rugs in which we snuggled down for the night, listening to the heavy breathing of the cows and the deep contented munching as they chewed the cud.

Buck and I held a short council of war before dropping off to sleep. We had come as near to our aiming point, Monte Cimone, as our route was likely to take us and therefore we must decide upon the line to take thereafter. Our friendly mountain, nearly 7000 feet high, lay only a few miles to the south, its usefulness for us performed. After some discussion, we reached the conclusion that to go to Ancona on the off-chance of being able to get out by sea was almost certainly a waste of good shoe leather and that we would do better to work our way southwards, keeping to the line of the mountains and to the small villages to avoid the Germans. We had had no reliable tidings of the progress of the war but decided to cross the Appennines as soon as possible because we did not know how much longer the snow would hold its hand.

We also decided that we must find someone who had a good set of maps as it gave us a feeling of insecurity to go on, as we had been, virtually in the dark. It was our practice continually to ask anyone we met whether there were any Germans about and what was the name of the next village but beyond that we had very little idea in which direction we were heading. After a final cigarette, we turned over to sleep.

As we were perpetually very hungry, it was imperative to smoke in order to dull the appetite and the ways and means of acquiring tobacco occupied much thought and ingenuity. When we stayed at a house and the neighbours came in "to see the English Officers" we would levy a toll of precious smokes in exchange!

Morning came and with it a really excellent breakfast, the first proper one we had enjoyed since leaving the care of the Ferraris at Pieve. It consisted of confections like thick pancakes with jugs of hot milk to wash them down. They were made of flour and water, rolled out flat, cut into circles about eight inches across and then put for three or four minutes between red hot tiles kept specially heated in the fire for that purpose. This was the one and only occasion on which we were offered these delicacies and very good they were too!

After jolly farewells and good wishes, we departed. We had been advised to go by a field path down to the river and up to the village of San Martino as a start. Our host could not provide any maps so we planned to find someone in San Martino who could. The path led us down the valley between walls of rock which soon closed right in upon us so that we had to clamber along the edge of a boiling torrent between vast boulders like giant footballs till we came out the other side in an open space above the River Panaro.

The country had become very wild again; the river at our feet was a raging cauldron of water but, luckily, there was a small suspension bridge right in front of us. We made our way down the hillside through the thickets and came to the bridge. It must have seen many long years of service and though only a foot bridge, had become rickety beyond words with age. Setting our feet gingerly on its slats, we picked our way over the foaming current beneath, and soon were safely over.

Opposite there were hills rising as steeply as the ones down which we had just come. There were masses of huge chestnut trees, their leaves turning gold and there were the terraces of cultivation where the farmers grew their crops on the steep slopes. To our right, half way up the hill was the village of San Martino, a huddle of old grey houses with their red roofs catching the sun as it broke through the morning mists. We toiled up the road to the village and found our way into the square where we asked a loafer if he knew of anyone who might have a map.

He said he would enquire at the post office and village store, and we followed him in. After some talk, a Baedeker edition of Italy was forthcoming which we eagerly scanned. The owner would not part with it but suggested that we made a list of the villages through which we wished to pass and I agreed to do this, omitting the name of San Martino in case the Germans should pick us up in the neighbourhood. It was a godsend to be able to study a large scale map on which appeared the names of even the smallest villages and Buck and I both tried to photograph on our minds as much detail as we could. The list of place names assisted us for the next hundred miles or more on our way and was quite invaluable.

Leaving the village by a rough hill-road, we came to Montese in an hour and then continued by a good but lonely road till we came to Riola. The walls of the houses here were plastered with posters asking for recruits to the Todt Organisation, the German Labour Corps. Usually they portrayed a beefy-looking workman full of the joys of living holding a pick or shovel with some sort of caption like this beneath, "Join the Todt Organisation and do your part in freeing the Fatherland from the hated invader." From

what we could gather from the locals the only invaders they wanted to see the backs of were the Germans and recruiting, as has been mentioned before, was in the doldrums.

Our road twisted and turned on its way eastwards, sometimes through a tunnel of chestnuts, sometimes on the razor back of a windswept ridge and then swooping down to and over a mountain freshet then up again and onwards. Sometimes Buck and I would have preferred the road to have continued on a steady level of dullness as these swoops down and up, often of fifty feet or so, sapped our wearied legs weakened as they were by the exclusively farinaceous diet.

Of a sudden the road began to fall away rapidly and we saw that we had come to the valley of the River Reno. It was narrow and deep so we decided that it would be better to stop the night on the top of the hill. Our search for lodgings became protracted because, as we realised later, the proximity of the main road and railway, upon which there was much military traffic, made the Italians windy. Riola, where we had halted, had its centre in the valley but had spread up the hill to where we stood surveying the scene. The road was the main road from Bologna to Pisa and Leghorn.

Finally we found a small house to take us in and, with our usual ill-luck, seemed to have picked a more than usually poverty-stricken one. We found a sad household, one which had wilted under the loss of dear ones but a meal of sorts was eventually forthcoming. Our appetites whetted by the keen autumn air and a walk of some twenty miles could have done ample justice to a Lord Mayor's banquet with all the frills but what was put before us was bread and cheese, with only water to wash it down, not even any grapes. Having consumed this wholesome but unsatisfying repast, we retired to sleep as the only illumination was a guttering oil lamp and our hosts shewed us into, surprisingly enough, a dry, warm and spacious barn with adequate supplies of straw.

Perhaps we had only ourselves to blame for the poor rations and accommodation because it was always our motto to choose a modest house. The likelihood of being "sold" to the Germans was more remote if we stayed with the poorer classes; this is not meant as a slight on the better-class Italians but as they were better educated, they were closer in touch with the war and might be more easily tempted by easy money. Whether this supposition was accurate or not can never be proved so far as we were concerned as our journey did not provide the opportunity.

In the morning, rising cold and stiff from our straw beds and brushing the remains of our bedding from our clothes, we moved across the farmyard to the house to see what our host could produce in the way of breakfast. We had a rough wash under the pump (shaving was a once-a-week luxury) and went in to


Rósola
Montalto
la Trappola
Tolé
Montetortore
Prunarolo
Pian di Venola
Sibano
NECROPOLI ETRUSCA
Lama di Setta
Vado
Livergnano
Berrocchi
Villa d'Aiano
Castel d'Aiano
Borgo d. Ravari
Cereglio
Susano
Calvenzano
Carviano
Casigno
Vergato
Riovéggio
Monzuno
Ca' di Giulietto
S. Niccolò d. Gugl.
Anconella
Sabbioni
Barbarolo
Poggiolo
Loiano
Scanello
Quinzano
S. Giacomo Maggiore
Salto
Montese
Sassomolare
Rotteno
Musiolo
Riola
Labante
T. Vergatello
T. Aneva
Grizzana
M. Stanco
Pian di Setta
P.te Locatello
Montorio
Monteacuto Vallese
M. Venere
Gabbiano
Trasasso
Bibulano
Stiolo
Roncastaldo
Vergiano
Mad. d. Boschi
Valle
Maserno
Iola
Albarelli
Pietra colora
Maria Villiana
Rocca Pitigliana
Riola di Vergato
Lissano
Marano
Rocchetta Mattei
Monteacuto Ragazza
Collina
Lagaro
Ripoli
Cedrecchia
S. Benedetto V. di Sambro
Fradusto
Monghidoro
Frassineta
M. d. Torraccia
Abetaia
Bombiana
Staz. S. Benedetto di S.
Castiglion d. Pepoli
S. Andrea
Zaccanesca
Piamaggio
Ca d. Costa
Filigare
Gaggio Montano
Pian di Verzuno
Vigo
M. Vigese
Verzuno
Carzanella
Qualtro
Mad. d. Fornelli
Silla
Cabba
Pian di Casale
Carpineta
Camugnano
Trasserra
Sparvo
Monte Fredente
Castel d. Alpi
Pian di Balestra
la Posta
C. di Canda
Corvella
Pieve di Casio
Castel di Casio
Casola
Capugnano
Piano d. Voglio
Ranuzzi
P.so d. Raticosa
Pietramala
Castelluccio
Porretta Terme
Serra dei Zanchetto
Mogne
Lagora
M. Bastione
Monteacuto
M. Tresca
Capanne
Suviana
Venturina
Castiglione dei Pepoli
Bruscoli
La Casetta
Covigliaio
Sasso di Castro
Pagliana
Lustrola
Granaglione
Pavana
Badi
Baigno
Bargi
Lago Brasimone
Lago di Suviana
Rasora
Bragazza
Serravalle
Roncobilaccio
Selva
Traversa
Poggio
Castello
Sambuca Pist.
Il Poggio di Badi
Taviano
M. Calvi
M. Casciaio
Sant. di Bocca di Rio
Giacomo
Molino d. Pallone
Bellavalle
Boni
Biagioni
il Pecorile
la Badia
Montepiano
P.so d. Futa
Castro S. Martino
Cornacchiaia
M. Ciferna
M. Gazzaro
Lagacci
Córniolo
Tréppio
Lentula
Fossato
Cant.
la Crocetta
V.la Dogana
S. Lucia
Frassignoni
Pracchia
S. Pellegrino
Stabiazoni
P.gio Cattarelle
Acqua
Cavarzano
Mercatale
Sasseta
S. Quirico
Vernio
Mangona
S. Margherita
Monte-carelli
l'Apparita
Giogo di Scarperia
Spedaletto
Rif. Pacini
Luicciana
Migliari
S. Gavino
Rivio
Erbaia
C. Bianca
P.so d. Collina d. Porretta
M. la Croce
Badia a Taona
Monachino
Cantagallo
Acquerino
M. Bucciana
Luogomano
Gricigliana
Rocca Cerbaia
Carmignanello
Montecuccoli
Giratola
Cirignano
Tuzza
P.gio Muraccio
le Croci
Barberino di Mug.
S. Agata
Ponzalla
Gabbiano
Luciliano
Scarperia
Signorino
Croce a Uzzo
Baggio
Villa di Baggio
Migliana
Usella
Colle
Camoggiano
Cavallina
V.la d. Maschere
Colle Barucci
Conv.
Senni
Brana
Petrucci
Valdibrana
le Pozze
S. Moro
Fonzano
Tobbiana
Fattavello
Vaiano
il Fabbro
le Fornaci
Bovecchio
Quaranta
Latera
P.te Ghiereto
Cafaggiolo
Petrona
S. Piero a Sieve
Borgo S. Lorenzo
Candeglia
Santomato
Fornace
Montale
Fognano
Schignano
Trebbio
Novoli
Cardetole
PISTOIA
Agostino
Tornacelle
V.la Barone
Tignamica
Isola
Fabio
M. Maggiore
S. Pietro in Casaglia
Croci di Calenzano
Campomigliaio
S. Stefano a Cornetole
Faltona
Carlone
Tagliaferro
Borghetto
la Querce
Chiazzano
Monte-murlo
Bagnolo
la Briglia
Meretto
Figline
S. Leonardo
Secciano
Querciola
Pieve
Badia Buonsollazzo
Tassaia
Grici-gnano
Montesecco
Agliana
Bottegone
Barba
Galciana
Maliseti
Martino
Coiano
S. Lucia
Filettole
Carraia
Legri
Volmiano
Vaglia
Conv. M. Senario
Bivigliano
Poggiolo
Polcanto
Fagna
Pontassio
Casalguidi
Stella
Olmi
Vignole
Casale
Tobbiana
Iolo
S. Pietro
S. Giusto
Cafaggio
PRATO
Travalle
Chiusa
Donato
M. Morello
Pescina Morello
Fontebuona
Pratolino
Caselline
Vetta le Croci
Quarrata
Caserta
Tizzana
Casini
Tavola
Mezzana
S. Maria
Settimello
B.go di Quercelo
Capp. di Ceppeto
Catese
Demidoff
Olmo
Montereggi
Bracalli
Papiano
Seano
Castelnuovo
Capalle
Sesto
Colonnata
Quinto
Monti della Calvana
Reno
Setta
Sambro
Savena
Santerno
Limentra
Sieve
Carza
Bisenzio

break our fasts. This we just managed to do, with bread and cheese or perhaps it was cheese and bread, again washed down with cold water. Hopes of anything hot were dashed when we realised that our hosts really were so poor that they could not rise to a hot meal in the morning even for themselves.

We were soon on the way but before descending the hill we made a plan of approach. The weather was unpleasant with gusts of light rain and low cloud which, apart from the inconvenience, was in our favour since the Germans preferred to stay within doors unless they were inside a car or truck.

Just below us huddled the hundred or so houses that were Riola, split by the shining ribbon of wet tarmac up and down which ran a fairly constant flow of German trucks. On the far side of the road was the railway, a little to the right was a fine iron girder bridge taking the railway over the River Reno which seemed to be the only way across within sight. We hurried down the hill and approached the main road along a lane. When we were there we waited until there was a break in the traffic and hurried over, along the road for twenty yards then down a side turning towards the station. Everywhere was quite deserted, the rain having apparently discouraged the Italians as much as the Germans.

Turn right, along the tracks, no guards in sight near the bridge, "Come on Buck, lets get on our way!" I do not know whether the Germans had guards on any of the bridges, but in our experience, and we crossed a good many, guards were conspicuous by their absence. In line ahead with our heavy boots ringing on the sleepers, we strode across the swirling brown turgid water flecked with dirty foam. Every moment we expected to hear "ALT" from some gruff Teutonic throat so with each pace towards the far side both our steps and our hearts grew lighter for there was open country on the other side.

We felt as conspicuous as a solitary ball on a billiard table but if there were any persons around looking with hostile intent, they hindered us not at all and in two minutes we were on the far side. A track led up a steep hill at right angles from the river which we then followed and after climbing up some two hundred feet came to a small house tucked into the side of the hill where we stopped for a short rest. We had put our best foot forward to get as far away from Riola as possible in the least space of time and were beginning to feel the effects of our bread and cheese breakfast besides being soaked through from the drizzling rain. Before turning in to the house, we made sure there was no one following us but the landscape was without movement other than vehicles on the main road.

The couple in the small house were more than friendly disposed to the English and we were offered warm food which we gladly accepted and ate before a roaring fire. Cigarettes in limited quantities were also for the taking.

In all, a fortuitous stop and when we had verified that we were heading in the desired direction, and given our hearty thanks, we took our leave.

No sooner had we reached the top of this ridge when we saw the road plunge down into another valley and straight up the other side to where the village of Vigo clung to the flank of a mountain 1500 feet up. Threading our way along muddy paths in the drizzle, down we went and up the other side. Our second breakfast enabled us to make the ascent to Vigo without too much delay and we were soon passing through the ancient houses and out to the moor beyond where the wind and the rain swept violently in our faces.

Proper roads did not exist but there were the mule tracks that had stood us in good stead before. As we crossed this bleak bit of countryside the weather began to moderate and to become slightly warmer. We came down gently off the high ground to enter another small village nestling in a nook in the hills with its groves of chestnuts as every good Italian hill-village should. On and on we plodded, now in rain now fine, now down steeply now upwards again till we came to another main road, the one from Bologna to Prato. Our crossing of this coincided with the arrival of a German truck whose occupants, though they regarded us queerly, elected to continue without stopping. This was just as well since by then our energies for the day had nearly burned out and we could not have escaped from a fly.

After another couple of miles we came to the tiny village of Sparvo on the outskirts of which we found a farmer to give us lodging. It was a small farm but the warmth of its welcome more than made up for its lack of size and the warmth of the fire rapidly took the fatigue from our battered feet. We were taken in like long-lost children, our saturated clothes almost literally dragged from our backs to steam before the leaping flames of the fire, while the good wife dashed away to add something extra to the pot for the evening meal. In no time at all, she summoned us to the table and there before our disbelieving eyes on the plates lay two ample portions of fine grilled meat, an almost unknown luxury in the wartime Italy of the autumn of 1943, and generous helpings of pasta and vegetables.

Sitting back at our ease after this regal spread, we considered the day's doings and how our catering arrangements seemed one day to be plumbing the depths and the next day rise to the heights. It was fortunate that we chanced upon such kind folk because the twenty or more miles of rough terrain that we had traversed during the day had more than eaten up the limited amount of heat and energy supplied by two meagre meals of bread and cheese in the previous twenty four hours.

We entered into conversation with our hosts. Of course we had to tell them all about ourselves and in return we were given a vivid picture of the

difficulties of contemporary life. After that, we turned our minds to the next day's walk and picked their brains for any useful local information. Buck and I had, since we abandoned the Ancona project, been wondering when we should make the crossing of the Appennines. At this farm we were not far below the summit of the main ridge and asked for our host's recommendations. He told us that only a little way to the east was a bridle path going over the mountains which he recommended us to take. When we left in the morning, we should make for the village of Baragazza then from there to the Mill of Castagnola. He explained that from the Mill, which was buried in the trees in a cleft in the mountains, a steep path led directly up over the summit and down the other side; it was one of the old paths by which men came over from the southern plains before the new motor roads were made and we should be most unlikely to meet any Germans since they would have no need to use that path.

We were loath to leave the cheery couple and their fireside and the interesting talk, such a contrast to the previous barren evening but were soon bedded down comfortably and sound asleep, the exertions of the day melting away into the unconscious.

CHAPTER 9.

UP AND OVER THE APPENNINES.

The rain was coming down as we got up in the morning but, after some more of their excellent food, we took our leave with grateful farewells and strode out into the downpour. Luckily, after a few minutes the rain eased off to a fine mist with the low clouds clinging to and wreathing around the tree-clad hills. We were reminded of Scotland by the pines, dark green and dripping, marching along the rain-swept slopes of the Appennines and our thoughts flew to the well-loved places beyond the pines, beyond the mountains, beyond the seas. Perhaps at that moment some of the people in those places were thinking of us, two ragged, rain-drenched objects that passed for British officers slogging their way across Italy.

For the time being there was no path so we had to make the best way we could in the direction our late host had indicated and, true to his word, in ten minutes we spied Baragazza through the mists below and in ten minutes more we were there. It was a quaint village at the end of a road, at the head of a deep valley like a cleft in the mountains. The streets were narrow and obviously not much used to motor traffic; at least that was our impression though maybe the war had taken all the cars off the streets of Baragazza. There were also a number of people dressed in their best black clothes trooping to church through the rain as we passed by.

At our first attempt we missed the turning to the Mill of Castagnola. We expected to find a well-marked road instead of the track on to which we were finally directed. This track led round the back of the village and further in towards the mountains for ten minutes till, on turning a corner, we saw the Mill hiding in a grove of chestnuts. A fine large building on the edge of its mill pool; built of firm grey stone it must have been there grinding the corn of the nearby farmers for a hundred years or more. Standing outside, our clothes by then well damped, we peered in through the diamond leaded panes to watch the flames leaping in the fire-place and the miller and his helpers warm and dry.

He saw us and coming to the door, asked who we were. When I told him, he took pity on us and opening wide the door, bade us enter and warm ourselves. He pushed us in front of the fire to dry and in no time appeared with glasses of warm milk and a loaf of freshly baked bread. No bidding was needed to set us to eating and drinking these delicacies even though our breakfast was only an hour old inside us. Grapes were offered and accepted with gratitude. All the while we were answering a multitude of questions from the people in the mill and asking in return information about the track we were proposing to follow over the mountains. The miller said that we were right on it and all we had

to do was to keep on going till we reached the top. He warned us that we might find it narrow in places where we would be well advised to proceed with considerable caution. After all this and a rest of fifteen minutes more before the fire, we decided that sitting in the mill was not going to get us home so there was nothing for it but to brave the elements once more.

By a quaint stone bridge we crossed the mill stream and straightway the path began to rise steeply. It clung to the side of an almost vertical scree with a fall increasing to many hundreds of feet on our right as we climbed. Sometimes it threaded its way among the chestnuts, now mostly bare of their leaves, at other times it would come out in the open for a short stretch when Buck and I would be able to see the deep valley on our right full of sheets of lashing rain. Ahead and to the right one thousand feet above, was a frowning summit, cloud-capped whilst on our left the side of the hill on which we were climbing rose almost sheer to the same height.

It was slow going and the path was very, very steep so that stops for breath-getting were frequent, especially when we came under the shelter of the trees. Up and up went the path at its dizzy angle. No house in sight or passed since leaving the Mill only the trees swaying and dripping in the rain and the runnels of water on the path through which we splashed time and time again.

After what seemed an age but probably only an hour, we came to a place where the path eased its gradient as though it felt sympathy with the four weary feet that were climbing up and there was a small grassy plateau. On entering this we could discern the neck of the ridge only a few yards away. We made a final spurt to see what lay the other side but as we came level with the summit, we ran into a wall of wind and rain coming, it seemed horizontally, up the southern slopes of the mountains. Leaning forward against the force of the wind and clutching our hats precariously to our heads, we finally stood on the great divide.

Had the weather been fine the view would have been magnificent but the flying sheets of rain coming up from the south east obscrued all but the nearer features. It was apparent, however, that we were in a very sparsely inhabited part of the countryside and we could follow the track down the hill until it grew into a road and was lost in the mist.

Though we paused no longer than to take in those quick impressions, I turned over in my mind the fact that we had just reached another landmark in our journey. For the past year and more we had been held in durance vile in or on the edge of the Plain of Lombardy and for six weeks had been marching with our faces towards England and, here we were, at last on the summit of the

hills that had confined us. Ahead lay country quite unknown, we felt more than ever on our own and utterly committed to this enterprise. It gave one a curious feeling; rather like the feeling a burglar must have when about to enter a strange house as we made our unobtrusive way through the centre of a lately enemy country. It was true that most of the Italians were at least neutral if not friendly but there was the ever-present fear that, round some corner, we would meet those we especially wanted to avoid - the Germans or some hostile Italian who might give us away. This meant that we must always be on our guard if we were not to throw away the results of our efforts and the further south we progressed, the more there was to lose.

Coming back to realities, I strode off down the steep and stony path in Buck's wake after taking one last look over my shoulder at the streaming country across which we had tramped during the last month. Far away down in the bottom of the deep valley, I could just discern the Mill of Castagnola. Goodbye, Lombardy!

I have often wondered about the way in which a climber ascending longs for the descent and the way in which, when one goes down a steep incline with the toes rammed into the ends of the boots, that same person only thinks of level ground - surely we are never satisfied. Be that as it may, on this occasion, soaked literally to the skin by a chilling rain, chafed in many places by wet serge, cold, hungry and feeling very much alone we still had a spare moment to curse the day toes were invented as we slithered down the old track into the valley of the Sieve, a tributary of the Arno.

Buck and I determined to try the first farm we came to but for the moment there was none in sight so we pulled out a soggy parcel from our pockets which contained a hunk of the bread donated by the kindly miller of Castagnola. This morsel was chewed as we went along.

All things come to an end sometime and after an hour's walking we turned a bend in the road to find two large farms side by side. We turned into the gateway of the first and knocked on the door. This was opened and when we told the farmer who we were, he bade us enter immediately. He saw that we were soaked and took instant action. The household was stung into activity; his eldest son was despatched to make up the fire in the big room, the farmer's wife dashed off to prepare some food, the farmer took us into one of the bedrooms and made us free of his wardrobe while our soaking clothes were drying.

By the time we had donned a set of ill-fitting garments, the fire in the living room was roaring grandly. It was a huge room with stone walls and floor measuring some thirty feet square with a vast open fireplace at the far

end where a fair imitation of a Guy Fawkes' bonfire was blazing. Before it hung our wet clothes, the steam rising from them in clouds. The fuel used on the fire was some kind of long thin twigs which burned more fiercely, though more quickly, than any that I have ever seen. The heat was terrific so that we were all driven nearly half way down the room to a more temperate "climate".

Outside, through the windows, we could see the rain teeming down and every now and then the panes would blur over as a stronger than usual gust came along. Because of the pervading inclemency outside, it seemed all the warmer and cosier inside the large room. The walls were very thick and would have repelled a cannonball. We sat talking with the Italians who were very interested to know our story; they were incredulous when we told them that we had already covered three hundred and thirty kilometres in one month (about 220 miles) since leaving the camp.

As usual when we became involved in these sort of discussions, everyone began to pull in opposite directions. We purposely kept our intentions dark and listened to their suggestions; one was for us going to Florence and Leghorn where we would certainly pick up a ship. When I asked whether they had any definite information about escape organisations on the coast, they said "No, but there's bound to be SOMEthing". Another thought we should direct our steps over to the east coast and yet a third imagined the most certain way was to make for Rome, quite why I never discovered.

And so, in light and amusing conversation, the afternoon drew on towards evening and the good lady of the house betook herself to deal with the evening meal. We felt thoroughly dried off, warmed through and at peace with the world. Sitting back in our chairs, we would idly watch the firelight playing on the walls and ceiling and all would be silence except for the crackling flames and the distant clatter of pots and pans from the kitchen. The other menfolk were in the barns, seeing to the animals. While we were there alone I pulled out my tiny little map and, with the assistance of the route I had made out from the Baedeker some days previously, Buck and I made our future plans.

Now that we had actually arrived on the southern slopes of the Appennines, we felt justified in planning ahead a little. We had got where we intended, so far, without going out of our way and I felt that we might hope with prospect of success to keep to any plan we might make. I therefore suggested that we followed the Sieve valley until it turned south west towards Florence, then go over into the upper Arno valley which we would follow till it became easy to cross over into the valley of the Tiber. After we got to the neighbourhood of Perugia, we would take stock again but that seemed an awfully long way

ahead, about one hundred and thirty miles on foot. The main thing was to keep to the western side of the Appennines where we might expect to find warmer weather, an important consideration with winter ahead. With all this Buck agreed, he had appointed me the navigator anyway on the strength of my wonderful map, I think!

Preparations seemed to be going on in another room, at the rear of the fireplace in the big living room. Soon we were summoned to enter as supper was ready and we were ushered into the first meal with the proper trappings on the table since leaving the camp. At least eighteen must have been sitting down, each side of a long table on which was spread a fine white cloth and an imposing assortment of cutlery. At one end sat the farmer, a vast bowl of steaming spaghetti before him out of which came ladles full to be dumped on the gleaming plates and passed down the table. It was a meal among meals as far as we were concerned; first the great heap of spaghetti, piping hot, with its tomato sauce and garnishing of grated cheese, the new bread to go with it, the fruit afterwards and the unlimited supply of good red wine to wash it all down.

Of course, there was the usual questionnaire to be answered from those who had not been in on the afternoon session and as usual we succeeded in trading our story for cigarettes. The farmer told us that the Germans were quite numerous in these parts and that they made periodical forays round the farms for eggs and poultry (shades of the British Army) but as there were no prisoner of war camps in the neighbourhood worth mentioning, there had not been any bother in that line. However, he appeared to be very relieved when we said we would depart early the next day.

We had a fine sleeping place for the night, an empty stall specially filled with fresh straw with a liberal number of blankets. Buck and I turned in early and were asleep in no time at all, our bodies thoroughly recovered from the soaking of the morning. This, our state of health, apart from our caution towards the Germans, was our only worry; if we had fallen ill, we would almost certainly have had to give ourselves up.

At 7 a.m. the next day we were woken by the farmer's son and, after shaking the straw from our clothes, were ready for breakfast. The table was laid in the big room and we were looking forward to a meal in keeping with the spread of the night before but it was not to be. Suddenly one of the farm boys rushed into the room shouting the good old cry, "Tedeschi vengono", "The Germans are coming". The farmer asked him what was happening and he said that a lorry load were at the next farm (only 200 yards away) on an egg-collecting tour. He then said that he was sorry but we must go ..... quick. However he grabbed a large loaf and a lump of cheese from the table and, thrusting

these in our hands, pushed us out of the farm. On our way, we had time to collect our "baggage" which was stuffed in our pockets. Once outside, we were conducted out of sight round the sheds and bidding farewell, our host returned to the farm while we departed at a very smart walk in the opposite direction to that of the next door farm.

It was a great temptation to run hell for leather but we reasoned out that if any Germans were looking and they saw two ragged creatures suddenly dash from cover like flushed pheasants, they would draw the natural conclusions. Having gone about five hundred yards, we sat down in the cover of some bracken from where we could see the farm, to eat our breakfast. We could see one small lorry eventually move to the farm where we had been staying and a couple of field-grey uniforms get out and enter the house but they did not stay long. However we did not return, thinking that the farm people would be too scared to have us. It was dry work putting the bread and cheese away and when it was finished we got on our way.

First we had to cross the Futa Pass, the main road from Bologna to Florence and Rome, which was successfully accomplished apart from being nearly run down by a German staff car rushing upon us round a corner. Through the little village of Gagliano, then through some fine brushwood all russet with the tints of autumn till we came to the outskirts of Borgo San Lorenzo, a town of some size which we passed keeping to the north of it. Pressing on through field paths, over streams by paddling till I got sick of taking my boots off and replacing them and (very stupidly) plunged through some more with them on, we came to another town, Vicchio. The going had been hard as we were marching across the grain of the country, so to speak, hill following valley and ridge in quick succession.

It was drawing on towards evening when we were passing Vicchio; we were also hungry as we had not been able to find any midday meal and it looked like rain. Coming to a small group of poor houses standing back a quarter of a mile from the main road, we tried our luck but it must here be recorded that Vicchio was the only place where we had trouble in getting lodging; only at the third attempt did we succeed.

At the first house, before we were turned out again, we decided to broach our tin of porridge which Buck had been carrying - real Scottish oats - which had formed a substantial part of our luggage. After much difficulty we managed to boil it up and ate it gratefully, piping hot. Having done all this to the unspeakable amazement of the housewife, we were summarily turned out of the place by the husband when he returned from work. The second house banged the door on my toe, they must have thought we were selling sewing machines or something! The third house took us in and gave us a large

plateful of plain boiled beans, the effect of which on our stomachs is better imagined than described. We were put to bed in the cowshed and without any blankets. Definitely one of the worst days; no proper breakfast, no lunch, no adequate supper, no warm, dry sleeping place, our clothes damp from wading rivers, our feet raw from walking with wet socks and our boots going hard with the water. By unanimous vote, we gave the "Q" Branch our severe censure and went off to sleep.

CHAPTER 10

THE VALLEY OF THE ARNO.

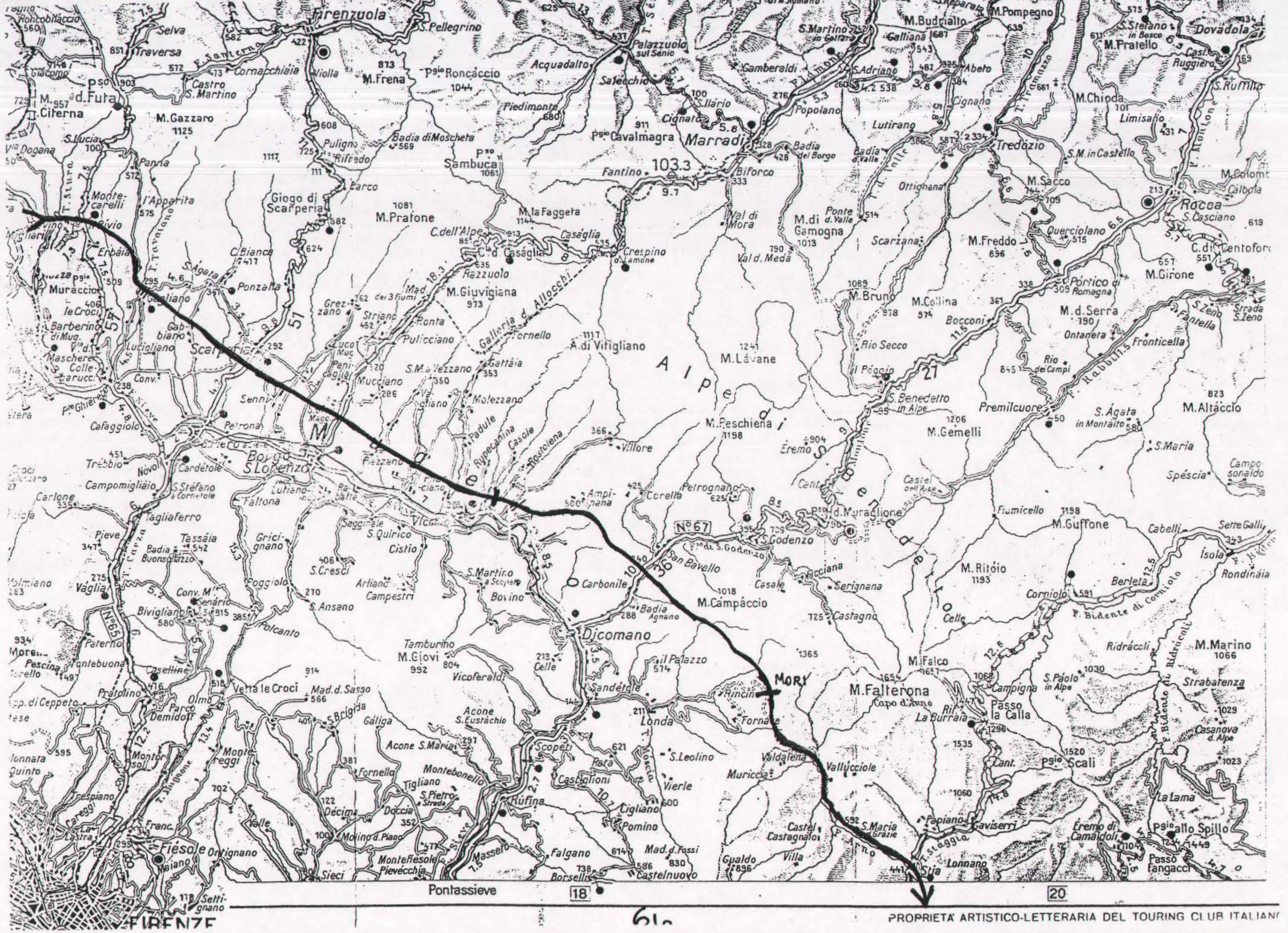
The following morning, the last day of October, came up misty and damp. It seemed as though the fine weather had gone for good and we both dreaded the thought of perhaps two more months trudging each day wet to the skin. There was no breakfast offered, no sign that such a thing was on the programme at all, so without many regrets we cast off the dust of Vicchio from our boots and departed up the hill in what we hoped was the right direction.

In a mile and the drizzling rain, we climbed nearly five hundred feet from the valley past some farms which seemed to be swimming in a sea of red mud. Near the top of the hill we met another traveller from whom we asked directions. We were aiming for a place called Stia in the valley of the upper Arno but we had no idea of what sort of country lay between. Our informant said we were on the right path and indicated the general direction to follow; thanking him, we struggled on to the top of the ridge.

Arriving there, we were treated to a magnificent view. In front and five hundred feet beneath us, in a narrow rocky channel thundered and tumbled a typical Italian torrent, winding through a miniature canyon. Alongside it ran a road, bare of any traffic. Beyond, the mountains rose in a tangled heap of rocky heights to a summit of nearly five thousand feet while to our right rose another smaller hill, covered with green pine trees, a swathe cut through them by some wood cutting party. There were piles of dressed trunks ready for carrying to the mills and, in the open spaces left by the cutters' axes, a carpet of golden leaves. A coil of blue smoke rose from a clearing further over and the silence of the countryside lay over all.

We sat for a time beneath an old pine, in the sun, taking in the beautiful scene then, getting to our feet, we began the descent into the narrow valley. It was hard going finding a way through the close undergrowth but finally we came out, scratched and breathless, on the road. We found a rude log bridge over the foaming river and launched up the steep slope along a ride through the pine forest. The scent was heavy in the sunny autumn air now that the mists of morning had been dispelled and we soon felt the sweat working through our clothes as we toiled upwards.

In an hour of slow plodding we reached another ridge, our weariness accentuated by lack of food. Again we saw the country at our feet like a map and, in a hollow far beneath our feet lay a small group of farms like a children's toy. We came upon a mule track which led us down the hillside and past the farms when it again began climbing up. We asked if we were on the



Firenzuola
S.Pellegrino
Palazzuolo sul Senio
S.Martino in Gattara
M.Budriallo
M.Pompegno
Dovadola
M.Pratello
Selva
Traversa
Cornacchiaia
Castro S.Martino
Violla
M.Frena
Pgio Roncaccio
Acquadalto
Salecchio
Gamberaldi
S.Adriano
Abeto
Pso d.Futa
Citerna
M.Gazzaro
Piedimonte
S.Ilario
Cignato
Popolano
Lutirano
Cignano
M.Chioda
Limisano
S.Rufillo
Badia di Moscheta
Pso Sambuca
Pgio Cavalmagra
Marradi
Badia del Borgo
Badia d.Valle
Tredozio
S.M.in Castello
Fantino
103.3
Biforco
M.Sacco
Rocca
Giogo di Scarperia
M.Pratone
M.la Faggeta
Caseglia
C.dell'Alpe
Crespino d.Lamone
Val di Mora
M.di Gamogna
Ponte d.Valle
Ottignana
Querciolano
M.Freddo
C.di Centoforo
Montecarelli
l'Apparita
Erbaia
Pso Muraccio
le Croci
Barberino di Mug.
C.Bianca
S.Agata
Ponzalla
Gagliano
Galleria d.Allocchi
Razzuolo
M.Giuvigiana
Val d.Meda
M.Bruno
M.Collina
Portico di Romagna
M.Girone
Bocconi
M.d.Serra
Ontaneta
Fronticella
Scarperia
Luciqliano
Cafaggiolo
Senni
Petrona
Borgo S.Lorenzo
Pulicciano
Fornello
A.di Vitigliano
M.Lavane
Rio Secco
Il Poggio
S.Benedetto in Alpe
Premilcuore
M.Altaccio
S.Agata in Montalto
Alpe di S.Benedetto
M.Peschiena
M.Gemelli
S.Maria
Eremo
Spéscia
Trebbio
Novoli
Cardetole
Villore
Padule
Rupecanina
Casole
Rostolena
Campomigliaio
S.Stefano a Cornetole
Faltona
Carlone
Tagliaferro
Corella
Ampinana
Petrognano
Pso d.Muraglione
Fiumicello
M.Guffone
Cabelli
Serre Galli
Vicchio
S.Quirico
Cistio
N°67
S.Godenzo
San Bavello
Isola
Rondinaia
Pieve
Tassaia
Badia Buonsollazzo
Gricignano
S.Cresci
S.Martino a Scopeto
Arliano
Campestri
Bovino
Carbonile
Casale
Serignana
M.Ritoio
Berleta
Corniolo
F. Bidente di Corniolo
Vaglia
Conv. M.te Senario
Bivigliano
Poggiolo
S.Ansano
Polcanto
M.Campaccio
Badia Agnano
Castagno
Celle
Dicomano
Tamburino
M.Giovi
Vicoferaldi
Celle
il Palazzo
MORY
M.Falco
M.Falterona
Capo d'Arno
Campigna
S.Paolo in Alpe
Ridracoli
M.Marino
Strabatenza
Paterno
Fontebuona
Pescina
Pratolino
Parco Demidoff
Olmo
Vetta le Croci
Mad.d.Sasso
S.Brigida
Galiga
Acone S.Eustachio
Acone S.Maria
Sandetole
Londa
Rincine
Fornace
Rif. La Burraia
Passo la Calla
Casanova d.Alpe
Montorsoli
Monte reggi
Fornello
Montebonello
Scopeti
Castiglioni
S.Leolino
Vierle
Valdalena
Vallucciole
Muriccia
Pgio Scali
La Lama
Trespiano
Tigliano
S.Pietro a Strada
Decima
Doccia
Rufina
Cigliano
Pomino
Castel Castagnaio
S.Maria a le Grazie
Papiano
Gaviserri
Eremo di Camaldoli
Pgio allo Spillo
Caregg
La Lastra
S.Franc.
Fiesole
Maiano
Ontignano
Valle
Molino d.Piano
Montefiesole
Pievecchia
Massero
Falgano
Mad.d.Fossi
Castelnuovo
Borselli
Gualdo
Villa
F. Arno
Stia
Lonnano
Passo Fangacci
Sieci
Pontassieve
18
20
Settignano
FIRENZE
61a
PROPRIETA' ARTISTICO-LETTERARIA DEL TOURING CLUB ITALIANO

right road for Stia and an old man told us to keep right on the track.

Up and up we climbed, through the trees until we came in sight of a small village of tiny stone houses. It was the hamlet of Mori within a stone's throw of the source of the Arno river. The last few yards along the track between stone walls which reminded us of the Cotswolds were a sore trial. We were quite exhausted from the day's exertions for although we had only walked some fifteen miles, hardly more than a few yards had been on the level and we must have climbed and descended nearly four thousand feet. We decided that this was the limit of the day's march even though Stia was still almost a legend, it seemed to be as far away as it had ever been but we could urge our tired legs and feet no further.

The size of the houses was in keeping with the smallness of the village but, at the first house we tried, we found a warm welcome. An old couple took us in gladly and while we sat before a cheery fire in the tiny room, they prepared the evening meal. As there was no lighting worth mentioning, it meant that the meal must be taken early and everyone went to bed at dusk. They gave us a grand meal of spaghetti and potatoes and, as usual we had to give an account of ourselves and our wanderings. They were a dear old couple whose sons had been taken by the war and they lavished on us the care they would have given them, the while telling us their troubles.

In this small village, we felt utterly secure from the Germans, a security proved when, on the morrow, we found just how isolated the village was. At all events as soon as supper was finished we asked to be showed where we could sleep and to our unbounded surprise, the old lady took us up stairs into a bedroom. We could scarcely believe our eyes when we saw a bed for us. In no time at all, we were on it and fast asleep, utterly exhausted and dead to the world.

The 1st November dawned fine but with an autumnal mist mantling the forest around and the grass was white with dew. We had the unusual luxury of shaving in basins and with a mirror but the hospitality of the previous evening could not rise to producing a meal before we left. However, that was the luck of the draw, it seemed.

We therefore left early, threading our way through the village by the narrow cobbled ways between the houses where the dung heaps overflowed through the open doors of the byres. There was only one track leading out of the village in the direction of Stia so we had no choice. In a short way it plunged into the forest and then came out into an open grassy space where it petered out, to our dismay and annoyance. Thereafter we had to go on following the general direction of the valley and soon were tangled deep in the thickets and undergrowth.

Several times we had to fight our way on hands and knees and once came out


Pratovecchio
Badia Prataglia
Serravalle
Vergheréto
Valico di Montecoronaro
Montecoronaro
Le Ville
Mercato
M.d.S.Sofia
Carpegna
Romena
S.Donato
Poppi
Lierna
Pártina
Biforco
Pezza
M.te Fatúcchio
Fratelle
Valsavignone
Bádia
Simoncello
Bascio
Gattara
M.d.Scura
P.sso delle Campane
Castel S.Niccolò
Strada
Prato di Str.
Lóscove
Soci
Marciano
Giona
Siregiolo
M.Castelsavino
Bulciano
Mogginano
M.d.Zucca
Ranco
Colcellalto
S.Donato
Sestino
Fronzola
Quarceto
Gressa
Banzena
M.Penna
La Verna
La Beccia
Chiusi d.Verna
Compito
Montalone
Basso Frassineto
P.so di Frassineto
Alto
Arsicci
Badia Tedalda
Palazzi
S.Andrea
S.Martino in Tremoleto
Buiano
Bibbiena
Campi
Sarna
Mignano
Viamaggio
P.so di Viamaggio
P.sso Montorano
P.so d.Spugna
C.Núccio
Quota
S.Piero
Ragginolo
Ortignano Raggiolo
Montecchio
Fontanelle
M.di Sovaggio
Fonte Andrione
Pieve S.Stéfano
Alpe della Luna
M.dei Frati
Borgo Pace
Terrossola
Chitignano
Castel Focognano
Rássina
Fragaiolo
Lama
Caprese Michelangelo
S.Casciano
Formoli
Collungo
La Palazza
Castelnuovo
Parchiule
Felcino
Mercatello sul Metauro
Garda
Masserecci
Pieve Socana
Tulliano
Poggio d'Acona
Valenzano
M.il Castello
Sigliano
Baldignano
Aboca
Montagna
Sompiano
Lámoli
Valbona
Salutio
M.Lori
Calbenzano
Vogognano
S.Cristofano
Manzi
Rocca Cignata
Villalba
Fischiano
Guinza
Chiassaia
Talla
Tizzano
Vallecalda
Badia
Misciano
Rocca Trabária
Anciolina
Pratovalle
Bagnena
Ponina
Baciano
Falciano
P.te alla Piera
Le Strette
Albiano
Montedoglio
Gragnano
Sansepolcro
Valpiana
Il Santo
Bibbiano
Cerina
Cà la Marga
Subbiano
Cast.Montauto
Il Cármine
Campalla
Vigio
S.Croce
S.Fiora
Corposano
Pamacciano
M.Valmeronte
La Crocina
Vezza
Capolona
Castelnuovo
Montegiovi
Chiaveretto
Montauto
Capo
Micciano
Cospaia
Valdimonte
Bocca d.Loppi
Gello Bisc.
C.Vécchie
S.Martino
S.Giustino
Busseto
L'Apia
Marcena
Gello
Galbino
Tavernelle
Anghiari
S.Leo
Gricignano
S.Anastasio
Uselle
Carlano
Borro
Campogelli
Pieve S.Giovanni
Borgo a Giovi
La Chiassa
Badia
Sovara
Fighille
S.Fista
Capanne
Celalba
Pitigliano
Colle Plinio
Vallurbana
Castiglion Fibocchi
Meliciano
Castelluccio
S.Marco
Cincelli
Chiassa
Tregozzano
S.Lorenzo
Pistrino
Selci
Lama
V.la Panicale
Pieve d.Rose
M.Fumo
Carboni
Vitereta
Laterina
Fatt. Monsoglio
Rondine
Quarata
Campoluci
Ostina
Puglia
Gello
Scoiano
Catigliano
Tortigliano
Citerna
Carsugo
Grumale
Fraccano
Il Romito
S.Maria in Valle
Impiano
Monte sopra Rondine
Patrignone
Pugliola
Antria
Misciano
Verazzano
Tóppole
Pocaia
Le Fietre
Mad. Mezzavia
Rosina
Cerbara
Userna
Antirata
Pieve a Maiano
Pratantico
Ceciliano
S.Polo
Pomaio
M.Pian di Maggio
Le Ville
Monterchi
Belvedere
Rio Secco
Ponticino
V.la d.Drago
Indicatore
Alpe di Poti
Padónchia
Lerchi
M.Cer.
Pérgine Valdarno
Casaco
Montalfone
Chiani
Arezzo
S.Fabiano
Molinelli
Albiano
Ost.
Montaubello
Lippiano
Roviglianno
Città di Castello
Bagni di Fontecchio
Ronchi
Le Poggiola
Staggiano
S.Severo
Ranco
Rípoli
Pieve a Presciano
S.Martino in Poggio
Ruscello
Il Molinbianco
S.Maria d.Grazie
S.Fiora
La Montesca
Zoccolanti
Candeggio
Viciomaggio
Agazzi
S.Firenze
Peneto
Prato
Uppiano
N°71
N°3 bis
N°73 bis
N°71
N°73

62a

suddenly on the edge of a chasm at the bottom of which tumbled the infant Arno. Finally, when we were in danger of suffering the same fate as the babes in the wood, we found another path which soon led out on to a proper track. This track soon grew to a road and, suddenly, round a corner, we came upon the town of Stia as the valley opened out.

We stopped and held an impromptu conference as to how to circumnavigate the place for we could see a railway station and what appeared to be a couple of factories and as it was quite a substantial place, there might well be Germans about. We spotted a small lane running round the back of the houses to the east of the town and bent our steps down this. In a few minutes we were safely past and came out on the railway about half a mile from the station. It was a single line affair and as it was going in the same direction as we intended, we decided that it would make for fast walking and would serve our purpose.

As we passed by the town we could see few people about, probably because it was still early and for this we were thankful. I felt that we had passed another milestone on our trip because Stia was one of those places for which we had been aiming for some days and we had successfully come through the tangle of mountains that lay behind us. The prospect in front was much more civilised, a smiling valley in the morning sun.

We began to make splendid time down the railway but I was a little apprehensive lest we meet a train. I knew there was not one behind us for we had noticed in passing that Stia station was empty but one might spring a surprise on us. However the line was very straight and we could see usually for a couple of miles. We hurried along to make up for the time lost scrambling down from Mori and I felt that we were putting a good four miles or more into the hour. About half past twelve, having covered some fifteen miles, we came to a small station, not having met any trains and stopped to have a chat.with a very affable woman who was apparently the station master. The name of the station was Poppi and there had been a prisoner of war camp there so the woman knew all about us. She took us into her tiny cottage and soon had an excellent lunch of pasta for us.

We took the opportunity of studying the map which hung in the station and found that we were following the line that ran from Stia to Arezzo. The woman asked where we were making for and when I explained that we were just going vaguely south, she said that there was a train due soon and recommended that we take it to save walking. She assured us that there was no danger but we said we would rather walk as one never knew where the enemy might be.

After a short rest we were away again and stepping it out along the

sleepers at five miles per hour. The landscape was typically Italian with rows of tall poplars and white houses with their red roofs. The sun was shining fully and the day very warm as we strode along. Soon we came in sight of a bigger town which turned out to be Bibbiena and decided to make another detour, which consisted of leaving our railway and going across the fields to the right as we worked our way past the town and rejoining the line about a mile to the south. We pressed on for another hour and a half by which time we were beginning to feel extremely weary and decided that as soon as we saw a likely-looking habitation, we would stop. We came to and passed by the village of Bassina and three miles further on our legs would go no further so we stopped at a small farm just off the road.

We were taken in not very willingly and for supper a loaf of dry bread was offered, nothing more. We did the best we could with this then turned in. Before going to sleep we perused our "map" but being on a scale of something like a hundred miles to the inch, it was not very helpful. Our long day's walk, about thirty miles had, however, made quite an impression on even this small scale and, weary though we were, we felt very satisfied. The hardest part of the trip, from the walking point of view, was behind us. We began to feel the first thrills of getting home and were accustomed to our mendicant type of existence being by then fully skilled in getting food and lodging of some sort. And so, thinking on these things, we dropped off to sleep in the straw.

Breakfast the next day reached nearly the same level as supper but was improved by the addition of grapes. This regal spread consumed, we hit the trail again the found our way back to the railway, continuing southwards. The morning was misty but there was the promise of sunshine which was soon fulfilled and the day became very hot. We had not gone far when we came face to face with a most official looking gentleman. For one horrid moment I thought he was a German but he gave us a cheery "Bon giorno" as we passed by and I subsequently discovered he was some sort of railway inspector, one of those somewhat petty officials who glory in uniforms.

After some half dozen miles we found a by-road going off to the east and as we wanted to get over to the Tiber valley, we thought it a good opportunity. It was one of those white dusty roads which spiralled up the side of the steep Alpe di Catenaja, a barren brown ridge of rock and from the top when we eventually got there, hot and dusty, we could look back as far almost as Stia one way and the city of Arezzo the other.

Pressing on we went through the village of Falciano and down into a narrow canyon-like gorge with heather growing down the sides and a brown, foam-flecked

stream bubbling between the rocks. Here we nearly bumped into an Italian Fascist army car but apart from this there were no adventures that day. Another few minutes and we were through the gorge out into the open country on the edge of the Tiber valley. We had no idea where we would make for that evening except that we had in mind the town of San Sepulcro.

However before we got anywhere near there, we came to a large farm where we thought we might find lodging. Going up to a man working in a field we told him the usual tale and he said we were to come right in with him. When we came to the farm, by the way he introduced us to his family, it was evident that we had made a bit of a hit. This was proved by the very excellent dinner which was soon forthcoming and the animated talk over the vino afterwards. He gave us some cheroots which went down very well and when we told him that we had not had anything to smoke for a week, he pressed on us a large roll of home-grown tobacco. In spite of our prejudice against Italian tobacco, this proved quite a passable smoke and lasted us for several days. To prepare it for smoking in my pipe, I rolled it into as tight a roll as possible, then borrowing the kitchen knife, carved off several thin slices.

The farmer's wife, an ample body, took us to her heart and treated us like honoured guests and we were given a bedroom to ourselves. It was late before we were able to turn in as the living room of the farm became crowded with locals and talk of the war and the prospects of peace went on for a long time. When we were able to get away, we again ruminated on the way that a bad billet was nearly always followed by a good one and that the good farming folk usually gave us of the best they had. I still had with me my Middle East officer's identity card and as an officer was a person much looked up to by the Italians, it came in very useful.

The morning, the 3rd of November, again dawned wonderfully fine and we intended to make the best use of the favourable turn of the weather which at this time of the year was exceptional. We were given a grand breakfast of bread and milk and then took our leave of these good people. A short distance from the farm we came to the River Sovara, a tributary of the Tiber, and along its canalised banks between the swaying poplars, we hurried. The level going was a great help and we covered the ground fast.

About twelve o'clock, as we were still following the Sovara, we were hailed by an Italian and his wife working in the fields. Going over to them they asked us to share their food saying that they spotted us for English at once which rather shook us as we thought that in our rags we might have passed for good Italian tramps. Their lunch of bread, cheese and good rough wine stretched miraculously from two to four portions.

On our enquiry as to how they spotted us, they said that we were not the first escaping prisoners who had passed that way and they wished to help us on our way home as best they could. I expressed our sincere gratitude and explained that we had come from near Parma whereupon they said they could hardly believe us. "Surely we had come by train" they asked. When I said it had been all on foot they were even more amazed.

We left these good people and continued on our route along the Sovara till we came to the Tiber, a wide tawny river swiftly flowing and turned south along its bank. In a short time we came up to the next town called Citta di Castello whose brown walls, mellowed by time, flanked the great river of old Rome. As we were passing through a field, we were hailed by a group of men working there, they also had spotted that we were English.

They downed tools and gathered round us. In a moment they had opened their haversacks and there came forth a fine supply of bacon, bread, grapes and vino of which they invited us to partake, saying that we must be hungry. When I remarked that we had eaten well only an hour previously, they said we must take the bacon but must have some vino to celebrate. I had noticed a small squad of Fascist soldiers drilling on a square across the river and I felt, and Buck also, that they were too near for comfort. However, when I said that perhaps we might go out of sight of those gentry practising the arts of war while we drank the vino, there was a roar of laughter from our comrades, "Those miserable creatures, ha, ha!" one said, spitting tobacco juice.

And so we sat down in a circle, with the food and vino spread out in the middle on a cloth. There was bread, hunks of cheese and a great slab of bacon the like of which neither of us had seen for very many months and flasks of red wine. We chatted about the war and told them briefly how we had come; they thought it was a good one we had scored off the Germans and hoped that we would get home all right. As we could not eat much we were told to put a lump of bacon and bread in our pockets against the future, but we did get through a pint or more of wine which from the heat of the afternoon soon went to our heads and when we rose to go on, our steps became more than a little unsteady and staggering along, we departed with thanks and a song. Their jolly shouts and good wishes followed us.

In half a mile we came to a small inn. We were both somewhat alcoholised and hot so we thought it would be a sound plan to turn into it and rest awhile. This we did and, more out of curiosity than hunger, made a start on the bacon and bread which we found to be excellent. I also came across a bottle of vino that one of our late friends had planted in my pocket and this went the way of the bacon. The net result was that when we again took to the road, though our hunger was well satisfied, our progress was more like that of a couple of

bank holiday drunks rolling home along the dusty road.

We were on the secondary road that ran down the right bank of the Tiber between the green fields. Everything was perfect, the sun was shining and we were on our way home with wine and food in our bellies and songs on our lips. But of a sudden, what is that? A dark object coming swiftly towards us down the road followed by a cloud of dust. It approaches and resolves into a German staff car with a large N.C.O. on the outside seat but Buck and I are past caring whether it was a German car or the Man in the Moon. A roar and a whirl of dust and it is gone with a smell of petrol only to tell of its passage.

When it has passed we suddenly realised that we had committed an indiscretion of the kind we had been at such pains to avoid and it would only need one other such indiscretion for our endeavour to finish in an Oflag. It acted like a cold bath. We then noticed that there was a narrow-gauge railway running parallel to the road some hundred yards nearer the river so we cut through the hedge and gained the tracks. It seemed safer for at least no Italian train would spring a surprise on us as a fast car could.

We stepped along smartly as the evening cool descended on the valley and after about an hour came to a station with the name of San Secondo. It was quite a fine station for such an unimportant-looking line and there was a friendly man there who addressed us with an invitation to take wine with him in the buffet. The thought of two tramps in a buffet struck us as very amusing. But in any event our heads were still thick with the fumes of the Citta di Castello wine and we said that we were more interested in finding lodgings for the night. Some more German trucks came past along the road so we thought we had better be moving from such a frequented highway and he said he would take us to a suitable place so, following him, we crossed the road and went up a stony track up the hillside. He said there was someone there who was very anxious to meet us but this completely baffled me. I racked my brains to think who of my prisoner friends might be there, but in any case how would they know I was coming? We came to a tiny hamlet of some half dozen houses and were taken to one house whose occupants welcomed us in excellent English, albeit with a slight accent.

They were an elderly couple who had been many years in various parts of England. The man who had met us at the station always took ex-prisoners to the house when any came that way and we exchanged many reminiscences of London life. There was a fine supper in front of a roaring fire in the little room and afterwards they dug out picture postcards of such places as Trafalgar Square which were passed over to us with some such remark as "You know this-a place, ha?"

We were weary from the long walk of about twenty-five miles, the excess of vino and food and the fresh air and asked to be shewn our sleeping places early. To our amazement, it was to a bedroom that we were shewn with beds

and clean sheets, the only occasion between September 8th and November 20th that they were offered. And separate beds. We slept like logs.

The good lady of the house called us early, as soon as the sun rose, with cups of tea as she said she remembered that all English people liked early morning tea and when I asked where she had got the tea from, she said that she had been saving it for a long time. After this luxury, we rose and found that there was warm water for shaving and washing in the jug on the washstand. I looked out through the window which gave on to the valley and saw there one of the most wonderful sights imaginable.

There was the broad valley of the Tiber, some three miles wide between the hills running away to the south. The whole of the valley up to the level of the house was filled with a blanket of white mist, the hills on either side were still purple in the dawn and the first rays of the sun were leaping over the crests of the Appennines, touching the hills behind us with golden tips of light. All below was shrouded in the mist through which came the sounds of a waking countryside, the lowing of cattle, the barking of dogs and, in the distance, the whistle and clatter of a railway train.

It was with difficulty that we tore ourselves away from this view and dealt with the bristles on our chins before going down to breakfast. This was another surprise. The good lady had bowls of porridge with cream and sugar for us and to follow there was tea again with toast, butter and honey. The dear old couple said that it was an honour for them to entertain English officers and, by the way we were being spoiled, they were certainly letting themselves go. While we were eating,the man asked us to take off our boots so that he could soften them with grease for us. For a time we tried to refuse but their entreaties in the end persuaded us and we were, as it turned out, to find that this service was of untold benefit. The old man was using some of their best cooking lard which must have been a very great sacrifice as this was extremely scarce in wartime Italy.

Having finished our breakfast and donned our boots, we took our leave of this wonderful couple who stood in the doorway waving farewell to us, almost in tears. We too were very touched by the kindness we had received though Buck reckoned that we should have to put up with some bad billets to make up for this one.


Belvedere
Rio Secco
Bagni di Fontecchio
M. Cerbaiolo
M. Macinare
Pian d. Serra
S. Crescentino
Cantiano
Ronchi
M. Frontano
Zoccolanti
Candéggio
Pietralunga
M. Cerrone
Fossato
Baucca
M. delle Gorgacce
M. Roncino
Pontericcioli
Chiaserna
S. Lucia
C. Nuova
Valecchio
Fiume
M. Picógnola
Schéggia
Secondo Mad. di Candaglio
Petrazzano
Fabbrecce
Carpini
M. Civitello
Mad. della Cima
Promano
Raggio
Samonte
Norbisci
Fornacelle
Villamagna
Montone
Corlo
Gúbbio
Calzolaro
S. Benedetto
S. Martino in Colle
M. Bastiola
M. di Sutto
S. Apollinare
S. Marco
Niccone
Padule
Castel d'Alfiolo
La Dogana
Umbertide
S. Cristina
Migianella d. Marchesi
Romeggio
Montelovesco
S. Andrea
Polgeto
Badia
C. M.le Salaiole
S. Paolo
Monticuto
Pietramellina
Casiglione
M. Urbino
Mengara
M. Acuto
M. Murlo
Galera
Ascagnano
Valle di Chiagio
Piano di Nese
Rancale
Colpalombo
Preggio
Campana
Anfoynola
Scritto
Galgata
Pantano
Morléschio
Carbonesca
Borgo Giglione
C. Contessa
Biscina
Castel Rigone
M. Tezio
Giomisci
Maestrello
Pieve Petroia
Frafticciola Selvática
Caligiana
Compresso
Coccorano
Colle Umberto I
Colégnola
Cannelo
Mantignana
Le Fratte
Pianello
Capocavallo
Oscano
Pirotta
Mad. d. Soccorso
Corciano
S. Marco
Pieve S. Vescovo
Ponte Felcino
Rocca S. Angelo
Monte Sperello
M. Malbe
S. Lucia
Fontana
Torchiagina
Montelmelino
Chiugiana
PERUGIA
Petrignano
Monte Buono
Ulmo
Lacugnano
Sterpeto
Palazzo
Pieve d. Pieve
Tordibello
Casaccia
Colomeo
Collestrada
Assisi
Agello
Strozzacapponi
Ospedalicchio
Castel del Piano
Bonéggio
Bruta
S. Damiano
M. Subásio
Costano
Rivotorto
Castelnuovo
Tor d'Andrea
Colle
Il Passaggio
St. di Cannara
Spello
Cannara
M. Cinque Quércie
Fanciullata
Spina
Olmeto
Foligno
Todi 40.3
18
20
68a
EDIZIONE E PROPRIETA' ARTISTICO-LETTERARIA
TOURING CLUB ITALIANO - MILANO, CORSO ITALI

CHAPTER 11.

IN WHICH WE GET A BAD FRIGHT.

Away we went down the hill and by various paths came to the Tiber again by which time the sun had come over the hills and dispelled the mists with its warmth. Soon we came to a bridge where the light railway passed over the river so we took this opportunity to cross the wide stream. From then on we made fast going along the river bank, seeing nobody, until at about eleven o'clock when we felt the pangs of hunger and turned in to a farmhouse to ask for something to eat. The farmer's wife, a slatternly woman, rather looked us askance but brought out a large hunk of bread, some water and a large bunch of grapes.

We then pushed on again but in a short while left the river for a couple of miles when we reached the sizeable town of Umbertide. The main road was now running on the same side of the valley as we were walking so we had to take to the fields and keep some hundreds of yards away up the hillside from the road, on which there was some traffic. This made the going slow and tiring but it was better than running unnecessary risks by using the road and by five o'clock we had decided to call it a day.

I saw some men digging a trench in a field so we went to ask them if they could recommend any of the nearby farms as lodgings. One of them turned out to be the farmer himself who said he would take us in so we adjourned to the house a couple of hundred yards away, the labourers following. It was a large place and we sat down to rest our bones before the fire while a swarm of children of varying sizes played and fought between and around our feet. One of them grabbed hold of one of the farm cats, a sad-looking rangy beast, and picking it up by the tail swung it around. When released, the terrified and infuriated animal sought sanctuary under our chairs whereupon Buck, who had an amazing way with cats, enticed it on to his knees and in no time at all had it purring contentedly, to the stupefaction of the Italians. One of them remarked that there was no understanding the mad English.

Time wore on and still there was no sign of anything in the way of food forthcoming. No one seemed to be bothering to lay the vast table. However, just as we were beginning to despair, the farmer's wife rushed in from the kitchen and, sweeping the top of the table with the floor brush, bade everyone draw up their chairs. This we did, then waited. In a moment she was back carrying a huge cauldron containing a seething yellow mass. We were each given a fork and the cauldron up-ended over the table. The yellow mass ran out and covered the table to a thickness of about an inch and was then garnished with chopped fungi and pepper. Then the farmer called out "Eat".

Everybody picked up their forks and set to, working inwards from the edge of the rapidly cooling mixture which we found out to be a sort of porridge made with maize flour and called polenta. It seems that it was a delicacy in those parts and what it lacked in the finer flavours, it made up in bulk and ease of washing up afterwards for there were only the forks to be cleaned. The table was left till the next meal when doubtless it would be swept again with the broom. Once we got the hang of the procedure, Buck and I made fast progress and were soon away across into the other half of the table to the vast amusement of the Italians.

After this fascinating meal, we discussed our plans with the farmer who warned us against going too near to Perugia, the next big town where he said there was a large force of Germans. We were then shewn into our bedroom, for a change not the cowshed but the stable, which we found we were sharing with a large brown carthorse. Our rest was a trifle disturbed because the horse snored loudly all night and kept kicking the boards of his stall.

November the Fifth dawned as usual fine and cloudless, promising another scorching day. After the usual breakfast of bread and grapes, we departed on our way.

As on the previous afternoon, we had to keep to the fields and bridle paths. Signs of Germans appeared when we saw, on a hill to our right, wireless masts and further away we could pick out the ancient city of Perugia, clinging to the side of a low hill. We kept to the fields and climbed over a low ridge from where we had a good viewpoint. There seemed to be nothing obviously dangerous in the way we were going so we continued down into the plain again. We were coming towards a large mansion along farm tracks through orchards when we were loudly accosted in Italian by a group of peasants working there. We went over to them and they asked if we were Italian soldiers, but I had to disappoint them. They said they were expecting a relation back from the army and thought we might have been able to give news. They then said that we must be careful as the mansion towards which we had been walking was a big German headquarters of A/A artillery for the area. I thanked them and we pressed on.

We skirted past the house in front of which we could see a soldier standing on guard and were so occupied with watching the house that we very nearly walked on top of an A/A gun under some trees. However, no one took any notice of us and we got by but it cannot be denied that for a moment our hearts were in our mouths.

Then we came to a river which, as it was shallow, we preferred to wade rather than use the nearby bridge. Again we got across without any bother and made for a small hill on the other side. We were by then somewhat out of breath as a result of our haste to put as much distance between ourselves and the German headquarters. On the brow of the hill we came upon a party of Italians

on their hands and knees, gathering acorns for their pigs. We sat down by a hedge for a while and talked with them and they gave us something to eat and drink from their bags, which was very welcome, before we went on again.

Coming round the corner of the hill, Assisi burst upon our eyes. Along the side of a steep ridge of bare rock was the town, tier on tier of monastery and church, mellow in the evening light. It defied description and Buck and I stopped in our tracks to gaze for some moments.

On our right was a broad flat valley in the midst of which rose the towers of some great cathedral, reaching to the blue Italian sky against a background of dark green trees. But we must go on, not look at the beauties, for it was drawing on to evening and we had no wish to spend the night in the vicinity of Perugia. Down the hill we went past the towering walls of the monastery town till we had come to the southern outskirts and cast around in a small village for lodgings.

We met an old man of about seventy years talking to a "smart type" dressed in a fine overcoat and wearing a black felt hat. He said that he had evacuated himself from one of the big cities to the safety of the country and thought that we should have no trouble in finding someone to take us in. I noticed that he did not lift a finger to assist, however.

When I told the old man we were English officers who had escaped from the prison camp, he burst into tears and told us that he had lost his son to the war. Apparently he had been one of those ill-fated to be sent to the Russian front from which he had not returned and there had been no word for two years, either from the Italian War Office or from the son. He was a widower and felt that there was nothing left to live for.

He said he would give us shelter but could not feed us so we cast about again and finally were taken in by a very poor youngish couple who lived in a tiny cottage. They were very anxious to help but their means, or lack of them, were the governing factor and we had "polenta on the table" again for supper.

That evening Buck and I had another conference over our map; the last few days of fast going had knocked off quite a good slice of the mileage. In the last seven days we had covered nearly one hundred and forty miles so that there was not much more than another hundred and thirty to where we estimated the Allied line would be. We had not been paying very much attention to the news of the war, in fact it had been almost impossible to get any accurate tidings anywhere but we decided that we must find some house where we could hear the B.B.C. before much longer.

It had also been our plan to have a day's rest after each ten days marching but, as we were working south very well, we were becoming far too

excited to waste a day, even if it meant that we had to forgo baths. We were both, rather surprisingly, very fit though Buck found his feet to be not exactly his best friends and it was he who finally won the day by saying that if we did stop, he did not think he would get going again. The food we were getting, even if it were the bare subsistence level, did provide somewhat surprisingly enough energy for twenty miles a day.

The next day was another of those "too good to be true" late autumn days, a clear sky and sparkling sunlight. Breakfast was an excellent meal of potatoes, very tastily fried after which we started on our way once more.

Still keeping to farm roads on the lower slopes of the hills, we made very fast going and soon reached the outskirts of Foligno, a large town. It was impracticable to make a detour so we decided to go through the eastern outskirts. As we were getting on well, the air raid siren blared out and we made for the shelter of a nearby house. As we were walking along towards it we noticed two somewhat ill-dressed men furtively watching us and when we passed them one spoke in poor Italian. Buck and I rather suspected them of being Fascist spies but they turned out to be two British Other Ranks and had regarded us with like suspicion. All four of us sat down in the shade of the house and had a good laugh.

They had some cigarettes which they kindly shared with us, our store of raw tobacco having been exhausted and we exchanged stories. While we were lighting up we heard the sounds of the air raid; it must have been about a dozen miles away but the activities of our pilots filled us with great hope and the desire to be back with them once more. Our two friends had been in a camp in the south of Italy and when she went out of the war, the Germans took over their camp to remove them all to Germany. They had been in the train for a couple of nights and decided to make a break as the guards were riding on the outside of the trucks.

One of them had an Italian bayonet which he had picked up from somewhere and during the night they had managed to prise open the door and drop off when the train was going slowly. They said that the whole truck load had got away, about thirty of them and they would have liked to have seen the faces of the German guards in the morning when they found the birds flown.

After some minutes when the bombing had ceased, we went on, bidding farewell and good luck to the other two. Progress was slow as we had to go carefully through the backyards of the houses but we eventually came out into a little lane going in the required direction. As we were in country where there were obviously Germans about, I suggested to Buck that we go in single file about fifty yards apart in case we bumped into trouble when the one in the rear would at least have a sporting chance of getting away.

A few minutes later when I was leading, we came up to a large house. It had a blank wall on the side of the track but as I came past it and could see over the wall into the courtyard, I was horrified to see about a hundred men in German Air Force uniform strolling about having their lunch. With my hands I signed to Buck to stop. No one had seen me so I turned slowly round and strolled back to the cover of the wall. As soon as I was out of sight from the courtyard I called "RUN" to Buck.

We took to our heels back down the lane for a few yards then, seeing a path going to the fields to our right, I led the way at a full gallop. Through the hedge and into a field we went and then found we had come to the Germans' field latrine, six thunderboxes ranged against the hedge and an untidy litter of torn newspapers all round. By another stroke of luck, no Hun was answering the call of nature though I would not care to say who would have been the more surprised if we had found any of them on their thrones.

For five minutes we went as fast as our legs would carry us up the hill away from the house and then sat down, out of sight to get our breath back.

Life was certainly becoming more hectic as we came south towards the fighting and it was obvious that our chance of ultimate success rested entirely on not bumping into German encampments through carelessness, using the excellent training we had had in the use of ground. We also hoped that it would not mean we would have to march by night partly because travellers by night in Italy at that time were suspected immediately and partly because route-finding would become more than usually difficult. Our watchword must therefore be caution and commonsense.

Having recovered our breath, we set off again, keeping to the fields well away from the aerodrome in the valley below. Through the shimmering heat haze of the afternoon and the olive groves we strolled till we came to the village of Trevi. It was one of those picturesque villages perched on the side of a hill which we reached after a stiff climb up a donkey track. As we came to the summit round a corner we came practically face to face with a smartly clad German officer with his arms round the waist of an Italian girl.

He did not see us so I backed out of sight till I saw that he and his bit of fluff had passed round the corner. We then reappeared and going through the village came to a large house on the outskirts, a prosperous looking place and knocked on the door. There were a couple of well-dressed Italian girls and a jolly fellow who seemed to organise the household all drinking wine on the terrace who asked us to join them which we did with alacrity.

They said we might stay the night and straightway began questioning us as to our history. The man was greatly interested to learn that I had been in Wavell's Army of the Nile and told me that he had been in the opposition

commanded by Marshal Graziani. Knowing that almost all that army had been taken prisoner, I asked how he had managed to get away. He said that he had been driving a transport lorry and that his unit had been captured at the Battle of SidiBarrani.

"Where were you, then?" I said.

"I was on the run from Tobruk to the front and when I heard of the battle, I was back again in Tobruk almost as soon as I started" he replied, "and when Tobruk fell I skipped it to Tripoli!"

"Then what about the battles in the winter of 1941?" I asked.

"I was too quick for you again" he said "I was safe behind the lines all the time."

He treated the whole thing as an enormous joke, particularly when he said all his unit had been captured.

All this time we had been sitting on the terrace before the house looking down on the main road several hundred feet beneath, along which ran a fairly constant stream of German cars and lorries. Our humourist told me that he was now driving a lorry for a farmer, having demobilised himself on September the 8th. He pointed out a group of huts by a bend in the road which he said had been a prisoner of war camp but the occupants had been unfortunately grabbed by the Germans.

Supper followed, a grand meal of beautifully prepared spaghetti which we ate in the dining room, the rest of the family supping in the kitchen. I suppose they thought we were special guests but this was the only occasion on our trip when we had a meal in the best room by ourselves. In the corner stood a huge radiogram and when we had finished, I asked if we might listen to the B.B.C. news.

This was the first time we had heard the wireless since leaving Pieve and we sat close to the set to get the latest situation. There was news of the Russian offensive and the recapture of Kiev. On the mention of the Italian front our ears became glued to the speaker. Just before the news came on, the English announcer - speaking of course in Italian - said he had a special message, the special message consisting only of four words, repeated several times "Tevere Uno, Tevere Due" and then followed the next news item. There was however little or no progress on this, the Italian front and the main fighting seemed to be going on in the neighbourhood of Cassino and in the Sangro Valley.

After the news, we returned to the kitchen and exchanged reminiscences of the war in Egypt. Our host was able to let us see a good map from which we made plans for the future. He suggested that we keep up in the mountains and roughly signified the appropriate route. That night we slept in comfort on a shakedown mattress with blankets, sleeping soundly after a day full of

events and excitement.

Bread and hot milk laid the foundation for the next day's journey and, after sincere thanks to our hosts we departed, making a rather arduous way through the groves of olives along the rocky hillside, past a large monastery and through a tiny village. From here we turned to the east to cross into the valley of the River Nera but it involved a steep climb then a descent followed by an even steeper track till we came, soaked through with sweat, to the village of Meggiano perched on the razor edge above the narrow valley.

The inhabitants of Meggiano must have scraped a living from the poor upland fields for the only road into the place was the one we were following and that was only a rough mule track. Feeling the call of hunger, we tried one of the tiny houses. The lady of the house produced the usual bread and grapes which we consumed and then proceeded.

In a short while the track joined another road corkscrewing down the side of the hill, coming from Spoleto. We heard the sound of motors and saw on one of the stretches below a pair of German armoured cars grinding up the steep slopes. Discretion getting the better part of valour, we dived into a small copse and watched them go by, the commanders sitting on the turrets, brown leather helmets and goggles on their heads.

After a scrambly half-hour, we arrived at the bottom of the valley and turned right, downstream. But our pleasure at reaching level ground again was damped by the falling of heavy rain. For a week the sky had been an unclouded blue but we felt it was not playing quite fair since we were making such excellent progress. The outlook became bleak, there was not a house in sight and the light beginning to fail but there was no option but to push on and hope for the best.

After another miserable hour, two somewhat bedraggled objects came to the town of Scheggino, a small but compact place on the banks of the Nera. I asked an Italian we met on the outskirts if he knew anywhere we might get lodgings and he, sizing up the two tramps as Italians, suggested the local hotel. There was nobody else in sight and I was afraid that we might be compelled to resort to this extreme measure and use some of our carefully-hoarded and so far unused reserve of lire. I then explained that we were English, escaping to the south whereupon the man brightened somewhat and said we should come with him to the pub where there was someone who would be glad to see us.

Hesitantly we accepted. The rain was now falling hard, we were soaked through, hungry, cold and fed up. We knew we were running a risk but the

utter darkness of the night and the very unpleasant conditions would tend to keep Germans and Fascists within their billets.

Inside the pub, what a contrast! The glow of lights against the beamed ceiling, the smell of wine, men and damp clothes drying, the excited chatter after the day's work and the clinking of glasses, the flickering warmth of the fire in the grate and the welcome of the landlord when our guide had spoken a word in his ear.

"Good evening, Boys" he called in English but with a strong Italian accent, "Come in and get warm."

He pressed glasses of hot toddy upon us and gave us a small packet of cigarettes, a great luxury whilst asking where we had come from and where we were going. He joked about the war telling us that he had been behind a bar in Soho for a time and hoped that we should get home safely. As the time was becoming late, I asked where we might sleep for the night; he asked one or two of the labourers in the bar but none could offer any suggestion. Eventually, however, a drunken swarthy type was prevailed upon to give us shelter.

The landlord apologised for not playing the host himself but explained it away by saying that some Germans usually came in later in the evening and it would not be safe for us to stay in the house. After a few minutes our unsteady escort was ready to go so we filed out into the teeming night in his wake. Staggering through the rain, he led us along the main road, then turned off down a narrow alley until we eventually came to a darkened house, the door of which he opened after a good deal of fumbling for the key.

Within, the house beggared description. There only appeared to be two rooms, one an untidy living room and kitchen combined, the other an even more chaotic bedroom with several beds. Our host, having wined himself almost stupid, did not apparently feel the need for food and indicated that we should all go to bed forthwith. He explained in a drunken way that he was an engineer working in Terni, a large town twenty miles down the road, that his wife had deserted him leaving him with a small boy of eight years to look after.

Buck and I glanced at each other, wondering whether to abandon this doss-house and chance our arm at finding another and better billet but we eventually decided that a roof, even of this low quality, was better than the possibility of a night in the rain. Our host went into the bedroom, indicating a bed in one corner with a pile of dirty blankets on it and said we could sleep there. On another small bed lay his small son and Buck and I could not suppress a feeling of deep sympathy for the little boy saddled with such a ghastly parent.


FOLIGNO
M.Cologna
M.Puranno
Trevi
M.Serano
M.Brunette
M.Maggiore
Campello
M.Pianciano
M.Cannaiola
Sellano
Montesanto
Villamagina
Belforte
Triponzo
Cerreto di Spoleto
Borgo
Ponte
M.Galloro
Norrosce
M.Cavallo
M.Civitella
Chiusita
Cervara
Saccovescio
Preci
Piedivalle
Campiano
Campi Vecchio
Ancarano
S.Angelo
Abeto
M.Cavagna
M.di Legogne
Cortigno
Biselli
Serravalle
Norcia
Forca d'Ancarano
M.Patino
Visso
Vallopa
C. Appennino
Le Fornaci
Appennino
M.Rotondo
Castelsantangelo
Vallinfante
Nocria
M.Bicco
M.Priore
Montefortino
Amandola
M.Sibilla
Montemonaco
M.Porche
M.Argentella
M.Lieto
Castelluccio
Piano Grande
M.Vettore
M.Vettoretto
Forca di Presta
M.Ceresa
Montegallo
Arquata
M.Terminillo
Terminilletto
Rif.Umberto I
Lisciano
Lugnano di Vazia
Vazia
Cantalice
M.Bove
Micigliano
Antrodoco
Gole di Antrodoco
Borgo Velino
RIETI
CITTADUCALE
Castel S.Angelo
M.Paterno
Bagni
M.Belvedere
Greccio
Limiti
Contigliano
Colle Baccaro
Poggio Fidoni
Castel S.Benedetto
M.Giano
M.Calvo
M.Cerquito
M.Torrecane
M.Nuria
Piano di Cascina
Pizzoli
Cavallari
Sella di Corno
Accumoli
Cittareale
Antrodoco
S.Vittorino
N°80
N°17
N°4
N°3
N°77

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The man, dragging off his boots, threw himself fully clothed on to his own bed and was soon snoring in an alcoholic slumber. Buck and I also removed our boots and crawled beneath our pile of blankets to seek sleep, hungry, dirty, cold and very angry.

CHAPTER 12.

IN WHICH WE GET ANOTHER FRIGHT AND ARE BEFRIENDED.

Hunger woke us early but our host was also awake in good time. Looking out of the window we could see that it at least was not raining again and, as there was not the slightest sign of any food in the offing, left at half past six on our way. We strode off through the sleeping alleys in the grey dawn muttering curses on the house we had just left, awarding it the absolute zero for the trip to date and vowing that never again would we allow ourselves to be caught so late without a billet.

The valley in which we were walking was narrow, not more than a quarter of a mile wide and hemmed in between steep hills which appeared to close in further ahead. We followed a good mule track on the left bank of the river while the main road ran on the far side, hugging the cliffs. At rare intervals a car or lorry would come speeding down the road but, apart from this there was not a sign of life that misty morning.

For more than three hours we made fast time along our mule track, the valley getting narrower all the time. Then we heard a series of rifle shots ahead but as we could see nothing, we took no notice till, on coming round a bend we saw in the fields across the river, a full company of German infantry in battle kit practising the gentle arts of war urged on by shouts from officers and N.C.Os.

We halted. We considered the situation. No one had seen us so we dodged in behind a clump of trees to watch. The river between us was flowing too fast and deep to ford and there was a fairly thick hedge between us and the river so we decided to go ahead carefully. The valley narrowed to a gorge and ahead we saw a town sited in the very narrowest part.

I noticed that the greater part of the town was on the far side of the river so planned to continue on our path and hope that there was a way through without having to cross into the town which was obviously swarming with Germans. We came to the houses and saw that our track apparently continued on the same side of the river. Our hopes suddenly fell. There, a hundred yards ahead, lounging about in the road, were a dozen or more German soldiers. We decided that it would be unwise to try to brazen it out, so we turned back for a couple of hundred yards round the bluff out of sight to hold a council of war.

It was apparent that we could not get through that side of the river and equally apparent that we could not get round by scaling the cliffs above us. Therefore we must take our chance of going through the town somehow. Ever since we had left Fontanellato Buck had been carrying a walking stick, trudging

through Italy like a dilapidated squire viewing his estate. As no Italian ever carried one, it seemed likely to attract unwelcome attention and I eventually prevailed on him to part with it. This done, with regrets, we again essayed the passage of Ferentillo.

At the place from which we had seen the crowd of Germans in the street, there was an old pack-horse bridge over the river to the mainroad on the other side. We stepped out over the bridge, our hearts somewhere in the region of our mouths. Turn left after the bridge and through the town. That was the plan but it did not work out. Down the main road we stumped as bold as brass until we came to the town centre where, to our dismay, we saw several Fascist soldiers on duty, one acting as traffic control. These creatures, for such they can only be called, were far more dangerous than Germans mainly because, if they challenged us in Italian, they would spot us for foreigners at once.

There was an alley on our left so we dived down this until it reached the river. A first glance shewed us that it was a dead-end, the way ahead was barred by the river and an apparently impenetrable jungle of brambles along the bank. With a despairing sigh, we turned to retrace our steps. A heaviness was in our hearts for we were beginning to feel that our chances of getting through were slight. Had we come three hundred and fifty wearisome miles to be picked up in that dump, cornered like rats in a trap? Buck and I had a quick conference and noticed another lane that branched off the one down which we had come. We decided to try this.

Alas, before we had gone ten yards we saw the Fascist soldier ahead and suddenly a German N.C.O. appeared out of one of the houses, walking straight towards us. Its all up now, I thought. But he passed us without a murmur while we muttered a quiet "Good morning" in Italian. We turned and made for the river again, the German having disappeared into another house.

At the river was a washerwoman beating clothes on the stones. We stood for a moment as though in conversation with her, then Buck said "Its the brambles or the bag" and made off towards them. I noticed however that we might be able to sneak along under them where they hung over the edge of the water and, greatly to the amusement of the washerwoman, we forced our way through and in a couple of minutes were out on the other side. Casting a quick look over our shoulders to see if anyone was taking an interest in us and seeing none, we made off at the smartest possible pace along the banks of the river.

After a quarter of an hour's loping walk, we paused to gather our breath and strength. Still nobody was in sight but there was a large German convoy on the road, two hundred yards to our right. We both offered up a silent

prayer. The trickiest situation of the trip had been successfully negotiated but we were both feeling weak from hunger and excitement and voted a stop for revictualling as soon as possible.

The next item, however, was to cross the river and put the pestilential place even further behind but there was no bridge. There was nothing for it but wading so off came boots and socks and in we went into the chilly torrent. Fortunately it was no deeper than our knees and we survived the swiftness of the stream. On the other side, having replaced our footwear, we set off at four miles per hour over the fields. In a short time we came to a lonely farm which we decided to try for food.

We were in luck's way as we found that the young farmer was one of the best. He invited us in and told his wife to get busy preparing something hot for us which was soon ready. We told the good couple of the adventures in Ferentillo, whereupon he said that it was a bad place, full of Germans and pro-German Italians and he congratulated us on our escape. After a hot, filling meal and a cigarette, we felt revived and, as it came on to rain, our host suggested that we stay a while and rest. We chatted for an hour or more and about three o'clock, as it had then ceased raining, we thought of putting another few miles behind us.

We asked where we might find accommodation, not wishing to repeat the previous night's performance. He said there was a village called Tripozzo about an hour's walk up the hill behind where we would certainly find a welcome and with our profuse thanks, we went away.

Soon the path began to climb out of the valley by a series of zigzags through the terraced fields and after some time we came out on the level in the middle of a small village. There were some dozen tiny stone houses with grey slate roofs growing, it seemed, from the side of the hill, a thousand feet above the Nera valley. We soon found a house to take us in and give us a grand welcome. There was quite a party there who all fussed over us when they knew who we were and in no time the lady of the house said the meal was ready.

One man there took particular interest in us. He introduced himself as Fernando Lausi, from the village of Arrone in the valley, and said he had been a guard in an Other Ranks camp and had a high regard for the Allies. Such a high regard that he shewed us the British boots he had bought from a prisoner in exchange for cigarettes. He adjured our hostess to take good care of us and said he would return in half an hour to take us to a house where we could hear the news.

We then went in to the meal and what a sight met our eyes! Firstly there was a large plate of rich, steaming minestra followed by . . . . . grilled chops, fried potatoes and brussel sprouts. Good bread as well and to complete

the illusion, two cups of tea appeared. Mere words can never adequately convey our appreciation of all the kindness we were shewn - we had struck lucky again.

He of the boots returned, telling us to call him "Lousy" as all the soldiers had, and led us away a few doors up the village street to another house. In the living room there was a small assembly listening to Candidus' broadcast but Lousy said they must switch on to the English news. He then introduced us and gave us a cigar apiece. There was nothing of importance except that we heard that the fighting was still on the Sangro River.

We mentioned that we should like very much to see a map if one could be obtained and Lousy said he believed the owner of the house had a touring guide of Italy which after some searching was finally produced. We then had a conference. Lousy recommended that we strike away to the south east, away from the inhabited country to the south and pointed out a route. It was very hilly but better that than a series of Ferentillos. However I was doubtful of navigating successfully through such wild country without the aid of the map and Lousy said that was easily solved, tearing it from the guide, commenting that the owner would not miss it anyway!

After that, we went back to go to bed and Lousy said he would call round in the morning and take us some distance on our way. Bedroom was a barn, deep with sweet-scented hay and plenty of rugs.

Before dropping off to sleep, we discussed the events of the day and our luck in finding such a first-class billet. We decided to accept Lousy's advice regarding the route and, thoroughly tired out, sank into deep slumbers.

The next day the 9th November was fine but misty. We got a quick wash then breakfast of porridge and coffee. Lousy was as good as his word but before leaving he had a plan he wanted to discuss. He arrived with almost an armful of maps which were spread on the table and we were able to choose one to take us almost to the Allied lines - great thought and more than a little helpful.

He told us that he was one of a small band of partisans who operated from Arrone and had already some modest successes such as ditched lorries, to their credit. They needed arms, he said, and if we would take a message through he would be more than grateful. We calculated that at the present rate of progress we should get through in about ten days. He therefore asked us to arrange a flight by the R.A.F. to the mountain behind the village for the fourteenth day, i.e. the 23rd November, when he said he would have fires lit on the mountain top. This I willingly said I would do. He then produced a large scale map of the neighbourhood and marked thereon with red rings, three or four small places. He explained that these were bomber targets of good value, one was a German Corps H.Q., the second an arms depot and the third a power station.

I was a bit doubtful about taking the map, it would have been sufficient evidence to have had me shot, had I been caught. But I reflected that it would perhaps help the war effort so was persuaded but I there and then decided that each night I would hide it elsewhere than on my person when we went to sleep. Furthermore we recently had had such great help from Italians that I thought we owed it to them to do anything within our power to repay them. There was no doubt at all that, apart from the few neo-Fascists, the vast majority of the Italian population absolutely hated the Germans who treated Italy as if it were a conquered country.

It was then time to go, so thanking our kind hosts, we went out with our friend Lousy and his incredible dog. It was worth a few words of description. In size like a Labrador, in colour like a pinky-brown rug, it was the thinnest dog I have ever set eyes on or am ever likely to do. How it did not fall dead in its tracks, I cannot say but every bone stuck out against the straining skin, making it a veritable scarecrow of a hound. Lousy said it was a good hunting dog. Buck and I agreed; it must have had to live on what it caught.

Lousy tucked his shotgun under his arm and out we went into the chill morning air. In a few yards we stopped for him to point out the German H.Q., a group of houses in the valley a thousand feet below. He also added that Ferentillo was a good target at any time. Whistling to his scrawny dog, we set off in earnest through the woods by a narrow path, twisting this way and that round the spur of the mountain on which the arms were to be dropped, finally debouching on to a small plateau where we saw another ragged figure with a bundle over its shoulder and a long stick in hand, the proverbial tramp in the flesh.

Lousy hailed him and we were introduced. He was Sebastian the Spaniard, a rather sorry-looking specimen with a fortnight's growth on his chin and gaunt features. Lousy told us that he had been in the neighbourhood for some time and was anxious to get out of the country; if we could take him with us we would be doing a very kind deed as the man was lost when on his own. In the circumstances we had very little option but to accept though we secretely hoped to be able to lose Sebastian before we were much older.

Saying goodbye to Lousy with sincere feeling, we went on our way with Sebastian. The addition of a third person to our party had several disadvantages; first, it made it harder to get lodgings for three as well as meals en route; secondly, we were not in his confidence nor he in ours so that his reactions were quite unknown quantities and he might give us away in a tight corner. Thirdly, he possessed the great haversack which branded a traveller as an escapee in the eyes of the Germans and fourthly, our medium for the mutual exchange of ideas was in execrable and halting French.

He trudged along between us on the rough mountain path telling us of his adventures. He was a private in the French Foreign Legion and had been captured by the Germans in Algeria in December 1942 but had been kept in Italy. His home was in Barcelona but he had joined the French Foreign Legion after the victory of Franco in the civil war as he hated Franco's cause. He added that his wife and children (number unspecified) were still in Spain and all he wanted was to get home to them having been on active service on one front or another in various countries for nearly ten years. That was enough for any man, he thought.

I explained to him who we were and where we were going. If he came with us he must do as we said in fact, orders were orders particularly if I told him to dump the bundle in any emergency, it must be done on the spot. He said he understood though I had my doubts, poor fellow. Our daily routine was also carefully explained, such as it was.

Anyhow for the time being he was welcome to come with us and we strode out through the keen air. The countryside was bleak and barren, a wide shallowish valley running due east between mountains, scattered here and there were flocks of sheep slowly moving forward cropping the grass as they went. The path soon led us to the village of Villa Pulcini, composed of a few stone houses where we stopped in the village pub for "a warm", the weather turning very cold though dry. We were also able to persuade the innkeeper to provide bread and cheese for the three of us gratis.

As we strode out into the fresh air again, it was very obvious that we must step it out to keep warm. We met a few other foot travellers staggering along the rough path and in the middle of the afternoon suddenly found ourselves in a whirling snowstorm. One moment the air was relatively clear though dull, the next we were holding our hands before eyes to shield them from the driving flakes; it was the first snow of the year and rang a very depressing note within me.

The snow was lying, soon an inch deep and more. There was not a house in sight and we were very cold. But soon we turned a bluff of the mountain to see a more welcoming valley a hundred feet and more below. On the right about five miles away was the sizeable town of Leonessa with more flocks of sheep and cultivated fields. From the left came another valley sweeping from the north, a grey ribbon of road threading its way through it into the distance. None of us were in the mood to enjoy the beauties of nature, warmth and hot food being much more important and we pressed on down the slope.

In a few minutes we found ourselves in the lower valley. We steered left-handed across the plain dotted with flocks of grazing sheep making for a

small village we had seen, not thinking to stay in the town of Leonessa for the night. The name of the place was Viesci. Tidy but stark were the houses though we found satisfactory lodgings and a good hot meal but the bedroom, a draughty barn and no blankets rather took the gilt off the gingerbread. Sleep mercifully came before the effects of the hot food wore off and it was late in the morning when we woke up.

After a light but reasonably satisfactory meal, the three tramps set foot on the road. Our newly acquired maps were of the greatest possible value and I was able to set course accurately for the next port of call, Posta. We skirted the town of Leonessa, dodging through some sweet-scented pine forest where the fallen trunks were being roughly dressed by Italian lumberjacks for removal to the mills. Coming to an overhead power line on pylons, we decided to follow this rather than keep referring to the map as they seemed to march straight in the required direction.

They certainly did. Down one precipice and up another. Over chasms and torrents also with disarming impartiality. Buck with his bad feet found it trying but poor Sebastian with the big pack nearly gave up the ghost so after an hour of heart-bursting effort, we abandoned the pylons in disgust and kept to a more rational route. In another hour we came to the edge of a sharp drop and could see the town of Posta below us, the road with which we had been walking parallel, circling down the hillside to get to the place.

From our coign of vantage we spied out the land. We could spot vehicles of military appearance in Posta so voted unanimously on by-passing the town. This necessitated bearing round to the left over a ridge which we could identify on our map; beyond the ridge there was a main road, another place to go carefully.

Off we went. There was no trouble in getting past the town and soon found ourselves standing overlooking the main road which ran from Rome to the east coast. Traffic was slack so that we were able to cross and get well away on the other side before anything came along. Rough going along a very steep hillside, nearly wrenching our ankles from their sockets, brought us in sight of Borbona but before we came up to the place, seeing a fine farm to our left, we put over the helm the thought of a meal being then uppermost in our minds.

The countryside had changed with startling suddenness. In place of the barren windswept upland streaked with flurries of snow and flocks of sheep grazing at will everywhere we were in a smiling valley, heavily cultivated. There were large and prosperous-looking farms, surrounded by their green meadows or small brown seas of furrowed earth waiting for the seed. The flank of the hills to the north were clad in a coppery glory of mighty beeches, glinting in the sunshine and the shadows of the racing clouds danced over all.

The trio filed up to the door of the farm and a knock brought a kindly-faced woman from the recesses of the house. I spun the usual tale whereat she bade us come in and sit down before the fire while she prepared something to eat. This sounded strange - 'prepare it' for bread and grapes was the normal midday meal for the Italian peasantry.

In about ten minutes, to our utter astonishment, she came back with three large bowls of steaming minestra and some appetising hunks of brown bread. We fell to with a will and in no time demolished the excellent food; this was the second of only three occasions during the whole trip on which we had hot food at midday and it was greatly appreciated.

From conversation with the good lady, it seemed that the valley we were now going through was sometimes more than adequately patronised by the Germans and in particular we were warned to avoid the town of Borbona and to keep off the road. It was with regret that we tore ourselves away from the warmth of the fire in this excellent establishment but we wanted to put more miles behind us before we stopped for the day.

Leaving the farm we kept going about three hundred yards above the road by using field paths and lanes but had not gone far when Sebastian suddenly gave a yell and dashed off up the hill across a field. Glancing at the road, I soon saw the cause of the trouble; there was a German truck coming along and though it was at least a quarter of a mile away, that was apparently too near for Sebastian. His attitude infuriated Buck and me because we could not have been seen from the road where we were walking but by behaving like a flushed pheasant, Sebastian would possibly draw to himself the notice he wished to avoid.

Buck and I squatted down behind a hedge watching the car go past, the occupants either taking no interest or not seeing anything out of the ordinary. I then went after Sebastian and told him straight out that this was the best way to draw attention to himself and that if he did not behave properly and trust us implicitly, he would have to leave us.

He was in a terrible state of nerves so I decided to go up the hill for a while. It was a hard steep climb of the best part of an hour before we reached the magnificent beeches mentioned earlier; we then walked along just below the summit of the ridge through the rest of the afternoon. As light was beginning to fail, we spotted a small village below, near the road. Neither of us liked the look of it but there was no other in sight so we went down to try to find lodging there.

It was a poor little place by the name of Fano. We found a house to take us in and were soon sitting warming the chill from our bones before a huge fire. Time wore on and I was beginning to get concerned about our meal

as there were no signs of anything cooking in the two-roomed house. Later, the owner came in, he was a poor peasant, and putting some chestnuts in a sort of wire cage, held them over the fire to roast.

This was our meal, about two pounds of roast chestnuts apiece so it was just as well that we had been able to find such a good lunch en route. Our host showed us to the bedroom, a small very draughty barn with only a few wisps of straw each - no blankets. Lying there in the cold, Buck and I had another of our conferences. He was feeling rather depressed because he felt that his feet were beginning to give out and, looking ruefully at them, said "Blast you, my two worst enemies".

From the latest war news we had got, and that was not up to date, we gathered that the line was still somewhere near the Sangro River. That being the case and at the present rate of progress, we might hope to be on the right side of the war in about a week. We were also coming into the forward areas so that we might expect to find the Germans not so thin on the ground as they had been and therefore thought whether we should not reconsider our plans.

Following this line of thought, we reasoned that if we should find ourselves in a tight corner, one might get away where two or three merely attract unwelcome attention. Further, we reasoned that the nearer we were to the fighting zone, the harder it would be to find accommodation and came reluctantly to the conclusion that we should part on the morrow and make our separate ways from then onwards.

It was arranged that after breakfast, if any, on the morrow we would draw lots for the starting order and depart at fifteen minute intervals. We exchanged addresses to carry news to our respective families. This done, we fell into a cold and uneasy slumber.

CHAPTER 13.

ALONE.

There was a breakfast next morning, but only just. As a change from the evening, we had boiled chestnuts. Any youthful enthusiasm I might have had in the years before the war for these nuts was by then effectively killed by the Italian fashion of eating them boiled for breakfast or, in fact, treating them as a main meal. A few nicely roast after a good dinner on a winter's evening are all very well but to have to start the day on a plateful of luke warm soggy nuts, and a grey day at that, was nothing to write to Mrs. Beeton about.

Buck, Sebastian and I then drew lots for the starting order; it fell to me to go first, followed by Buck with the Spaniard bringing up the rear. As I prepared to leave, I could not help a feeling of sadness at this parting of travellers but, once decided, we must not change our plans. Buck and I had footed it together successfully for four hundred miles and had been forty two days since leaving Toccalmatta. We had grown to know each other very well, to know those little faults and idiosyncracies which go to make up each individual; we may have had our small differences but on the whole those forty two days are ones that I could look back on and say "I had a good friend with me."

Chatting with our host at breakfast over our cups of tea (yes, tea!), he told of a very interesting occurrence in the valley which had aroused the intense admiration of the Italians for the English. Whether it was true or had grown from an idea that had been put about, I cannot say but will merely repeat what was told to us.

There had been a party of about two dozen R.A.F. officers and men who had escaped in the same way as ourselves from a small camp not far away. They had begun to walk to the lines but, as they had been trained to aerial and not ground navigation, they decided they could go no further. Or perhaps they found walking slow after flying.

At all events they settled down in a village nearby and thought things out carefully. It was an isolated village on the top of a hill with a small plateau. A small party then volunteered to make their way across the lines and come back for the rest in an aeroplane at the next full moon, then about a fortnight distant. While they were away, those who were left behind had to prepare a landing ground with the help of the villagers who caught on to the plan with enthusiasm though they did not really think that the "English Air Force" would be able to do what was planned.

The moon grew and as the days passed all got more excited until at last the

great day came. The night was fine and clear, the fires were lit and all the village and the party to be rescued waited at the edge of the plateau, wondering whether the longed-for aeroplane would come. Had their friends got through or been recaptured by the Germans? There was no means of knowing other than by the arrival of the aircraft.

Time passed, the brilliance of an Italian moon flooded the countryside and picked out the white walls of the houses at the back of the plateau. Suddenly there is heard the distant hum of engines; the sound grows and soon it becomes a full-throated roar circling overhead. The motors are cut out and in a few more moments, there bouncing along over the uneven turf is a Wellington bomber. It comes to rest, swings round and in a rush the ground party is swept within its doors. A final word of thanks to the Italians and perhaps a carton of cigarettes (who knows?) thrown out, then with a roar from the engines, the pilot swings the aircraft into the centre of the runway and it is gone into the night once more, leaving only a smell of oil and a crowd of thunderstruck Italians.

Such was the story he told, finishing by suggesting that we ought to have arranged something similar for ourselves.

Buck and I shook hands, wished each other luck and then I launched off on my own. I was soon to have excitement for, as I came to the main road peeping cautiously first one way and then the other, two Germans were to be seen lounging at the gate of a large house some fifty yards up the road. I waited for a minute till they were looking the other way, then stepped smartly across the road down a lane the other side.

Walking speedily for a quarter of an hour to put the village well behind, I came to a good farm road where there was a roadmender trimming the ditches. Stopping to pass the time of day, I told him who I was and asked which of the two roads I could see just ahead was the right one for the village of Pizzoli. He replied that there had been quite a few ex-prisoners past and they had always taken the right fork, not the one to Pizzoli.

Now it had been my invariable rule never to accept the advice of any Italian for two reasons; first they might have given directions to send one into enemy hands and secondly, as they really had no idea of what we were up against, their advice though honestly given, was usually inapplicable to our circumstances. But on this occasion, whether through some sixth sense or because I was feeling very much alone, I decided to accept thereby setting in motion a chain of circumstances the outcome of which was very satisfactory from my point of view.

If I had turned to the left, I should have probably put my head into the hornets' nest of Aquila. But, as I have said, some sort of Providence turned my feet to the hills again and in the hills there were always ready helpers among the Italians. In a short while I came to a small village, the streets, such as

they were, running with mud and filth from the byres and as I went through I got into conversation with a farmer leading a horse hitched to a cart loaded with firewood. He asked whether I should like a lift to the next village. It appeared to be in the right direction so, accepting gratefully, I jumped aboard on top of the heap of firewood.

The cart was large, the load was heavy and the hill steep so the rate of progress was slow but sure. All the while the carter and I chatted, of the war and its outcome, of the hardships of the Italian people and of my walk from the Plain of Lombardy. I asked, merely for the sake of conversation, whether he had any ideas of what I might meet further south but he was a simple man without any views on the subject.

Three quarters of an hour of bumping and jolting brought us to another of the hill-top villages beloved of the Italians but this was in sharp contrast to the one from which we had come being very clean and bright and tidy. Bidding farewell to the carter and thanking him for the ride, I strode off southwards out of the village through the stony fields from which the people wrested their living. Soon I breasted a rise and there before me was a breathtaking sight; through the sparkling air of a fine November morning rose the Gran Sasso d'Italia.

In the province of the Abruzzi to the east of the Aterno River there rises a wonderful mass of peaks, stark and barren culminating in the superb mountain called the Gran Sasso, 9400 feet above the sea. I found myself looking across the blue depths of the Aterno valley at this grand sight some twenty five miles away from me but so clear was the mountain air that I felt I could have almost reached out to touch it. A lover of mountains, I was exhilarated and inspired by this magnificent mass of rock whose snow-clad summit strove to reach the blue of the sky above.

But I could not afford the time to sit and admire the wonders of nature so soon pressed ahead for a time along the level through heather and bracken then up another rise from the top of which I paused to admire the view again, even more wide and extensive than before. I could still see the Gran Sasso in all its glory but further away and a little to the right I could just make out the Maiella. I knew that on the other side of the Maiella there were the Allied armies and I felt a thrill go through me. Not so far now, I thought to myself and with a little more of the luck we have had to date, I should realise the aim of my journey, the Eighth Army and home!

I found a cup in the ground, lined with grass and out of the wind where I stretched out for a short rest and smoked one of my carefully hoarded cigarettes. Before me I could see a village; there was a road into it but no road out and while I watched for an hour or more, nothing more dangerous than a farm cart could be seen on it. Then I got to my feet and slithered down the grassy slopes

of the hill until I came to a woodland track which I followed to the village, called Santi.

It was one of those typical villages in the hills; a jumble of houses all more than three hundred years old with quaint narrow roads forcing, as it seemed, their way between the jutting walls. As I entered the place I fell into conversation with an elderly lady, asking if she knew of a house where I might put up for the night. She replied that she did and led me to a house in the small open space that served as the village square.

The reception which awaited me was one of the warmest ever, I was treated like a son returned from the wars by the household. While I was warming before the fire, the lady of the house went out and soon came back with a pile of food, being followed in by another lady carrying more dishes. The table was laid and I was summoned to eat; there was a large sort of cake and milk provided and the two women sat down to watch while I tucked in with the best will in the world imagining that this was to be my evening meal.

When food was put before me, whatever the time of day, I made it my practice to put as much away as my inside would hold for I never knew when or where the next meal was coming from. This occasion I made no exception to the rule but was defeated with only two thirds of the cake eaten. Imagine my amazement when, an hour later at half past seven, the table was again laid and a full evening meal of minestra and fruit appeared.

By the time I had finished ramming the food down my throat with encouragement from the women, I was feeling more than uncomfortably full, fuller in fact than I could remember feeling for many months and finally I lay back in my chair defeated.

Two or three of her neighbours came in after the meal for a chat for apparently having an escaping prisoner in the house was held in some esteem by the villagers who wanted to hear my story. I was very tired and my stomach unpleasantly distended beneath my belt - but managed to give them a brief but coherent report of where I had come from and answer a few questions until it was time to retire. The good lady said there was no spare room in the house but if I did not mind there was a very cosy hay-loft of hers just down the street where I could go. When I said anywhere would be all right if draught-free she added hastily that she had plenty of blankets so I would be warm.

She went out of the room to return in a few minutes with a huge armful of blankets and we set forth down the street a short way to the loft. It proved as good as she had said; it was draught-free and filled with sweet-smelling hay many feet deep into which I sank wrapped in multitudinous rugs and was soon asleep.

The next morning, the 12th November, dawned clear and sunny. In contrast to the previous morning, a fine breakfast was waiting for me. There was a

plateful of fried polenta, coffee and the remains of yesterday's cake. I stuffed down as much as I could but was beaten by the cake which I popped in my pocket for later attention. Before I left, I got out my maps and made plans for the day's march; they were of sufficiently large scale to shew the paths which was most useful in avoiding places where the Germans might be. The main problem for the day, as seen from the map, was the crossing of the main road from Aquila to Rome, a very important artery supplying the eastern part of the German front. It was therefore essential not only to cross the road but to get some little way beyond before halting for the night and that meant a walk of some twenty hilly miles.

Bidding a grateful farewell to the kind folk who had looked after me so admirably, I began another day's trek on the way home. For three hours I scrambled over hills and valleys until I came to the pass where the main road and a light railway cut through the mountains. I found myself some hundreds of feet above the floor of the valley and could see the city of Aquila sparkling in the sunlight eight miles away to the left. I could follow the road coming towards me until it went out of sight round a shoulder of the hill to my right. I was somewhat dismayed to note that there was an almost unbroken stream of German lorries going in both directions but on further inspection I noticed that they were going into and coming out of a small copse not far from the road.

I turned my attention to this and then realised that it was a ration distributing point; there must have been twenty or so lorries waiting in a queue while a dozen or more were filling up at various depots then turning out on to the road again. It also struck me that, if only I could get the information through to our own side, the R.A.F. might like to get their sights on this morning routine so I got the map out of my pocket to make a mental note of the spot for future reference. It would have been asking for a firing squad to have marked it in pencil so I had to trust to my memory.

While I was sitting there basking in the warm sun, there came to my ears the sound of war-music, the music of Allied bombs somewhere eastwards over the Gran Sasso; it must have been a heavy raid for the air vibrated like a giant drum. The effect on the Germans was another tonic for me, all movement froze as the sound of the first bomb reached them; what a change from the cock-a-hoop Germans of the desert in 1942.

I strained my eyes into the distance hoping to see some sign of the aerial activity but to my sorrow there was only the rumbling in the air. Eventually the rumbling died away, the lorries with their grey-green crews came to life and the cars on the road began their movements again but still they kept their wide dispersion of about two hundred yards between vehicles.

Having imprinted the locality of the dump on my mind in connection with the feature on the map, I put the map back in my pocket and got on my way round the side of the hill walking through brushwood and low trees along the steep slope towards the road. In a minute or two I was standing only a hundred yards from the road and railway but two hundred feet above; there was fairly thick traffic which would make a safe crossing not easy but it seemed to be the best plan to work my way down to a group of large bushes near the road from which I could dash across when the opportunity offered. The railway was no bother for the simple reason that no one would drive the necessary engines with Allied air power ranging far and wide.

I was soon down and across the metals; then over a grassy open space and into the bushes, large clumps of gorse, from which I spied out the land on the other side where I could see some Italians gathering brushwood only fifty yards from the road. It therefore occurred to me that I should cut across the highway to join these folk and pretend to be working with them if any German trucks should be ill-mannered enough to put in an appearance at the crucial moment.

The first attempt got as far as the next bush, then a vast staff car came hurtling up the hill from Aquila. After a pause for breath I stepped out smartly again and this time gained the far side of the road before a lorry swept past me down the hill, full of cattle and German soldiers laughing over the tailboard. Before the next one should arrive I ran lightly over to the Italians and sat down with them behind another of the large bushes that dotted the landscape. I was only just in time for lorry after lorry came roaring down the hill with their loads of livestock, making doubtless for the slaughter house in Aquila en route for a multitude of Teutonic stomachs.

The good-natured Italians gave me some of the wine from their flasks while I sat there and ate the remains of the Santi cake, enjoying the sensation of having negotiated a difficult fence and the warmth of the sun. But I could not lie there all day so scrambled to my feet, bid farewell to the foresters and walked off in the afternoon heat.

I found myself in country very different to that in which I had been accustomed to, it was far more civilised, closely cultivated with the villages near togther and plenty of good roads. The latter were the biggest drawback for where there were good roads there might well be Germans so that I spent the afternoon hiking over the fields and through farmhouses and the backs of villages until I came to Collimento via Poggio San Maria.

The approach into Collimento was made as the afternoon was drawing on; the road led up a steep hill for a few yards and turned into the village of some dozen sizeable and many other smaller houses. As I came round the corner, I

Scala di 1: 200 000 (1cm = 2

spotted a man wearing what I took to be a policeman's uniform; this was bad, I thought, this will never do. Evasive action was obviously called for so I dodged round the next house pretty sharply only to see the same gentleman looking at me curiously down the street. Further evasive action was therefore taken but the lane into which I turned led round, to my horror, to the village square where the policeman stood talking to another Italian in some sort of hunting clothing.

There was really nothing left except to walk past them but as I approached the policeman's friend addressed me in English and offered assistance if that were needed. I said that to be quite frank, I had not been too pleased with meeting a policeman whereupon he replied, laughing, that the policeman was there more to help the Allies than the Germans. They both suggested that I should like to have a rest in the local to which I agreed; I thought that I might be able to pick up some cigarettes and perhaps a glass of vino.

We had no sooner gone into the pub than there was a big commotion outside; I thought there must be Germans about but it turned out to be a couple of Italians coming in to see one of their friends, as they termed me. The policeman said that they had been in England and could speak the language well but when I asked one where he had been he said -

"Yars, I ha'bin inna Englantt mucha time."

"But where exactly," I asked, "London perhaps?"

"Non Non," he replied, "I ha'bin in Chicago, Illinois."

I said "But that's the U.S.A. not England."

"Yars," he replied "thatsa right, Englantt."

I gave up entirely when his friend confirmed that they had been in England, in "Barstarn, Mass."

Everybody else in the pub obviously held these two in high regard and in the end I verily believe that they thought it was I who was the imposter not these two products of American culture but I turned the situation to good account by demanding as many packets of cigarettes as I could lay my hands on. These amounted to precisely two.

I was rather wondering what to do about going on for there was still some daylight left and I would have liked to get a bit further up the valley away from civilisation but those to whom I talked in the pub vaguely, in the Italian manner, referred to a village "a little way up the valley". In the end there came into the pub, a tall weather-beaten Italian of middle age, dressed in breeches and a jacket of good but worn tweed; one of the "Yanks" told him that an English officer wished to go up the valley whereupon the newcomer suggested I go with him when he had taken the edge off his thirst. He lived in that village and would be glad to put me up himself.

After another quarter of an hour we left the pub, Mario and his mule train which was bringing light stores up to his village getting going to the accompaniment of shouts of encouragement to the refractory animals. I fell in at his side, asking how far we had to go because I could see the white ribbon of the dusty road winding away up the hillside far into the evening gloom and no village in sight.

Mario had no English but we made satisfactory enough conversation with my Italian until a great weariness began to come over me, so great that even the effort of making conversation was too much. All I could do was to keep asking at intervals how far the village was and he would reply that it was "only a little further." I was by then beginning to wonder whether any village did in fact exist as the landscape, or as much as could be seen in the wintry dusk, was almost as barren as the face of the moon and the only sign of life or civilisation was the white ribbon of the road stretching ahead along the side of the hill, always climbing upwards.

But all of a sudden, as I had come to know was often the case in Italy, we rounded a corner and there about a mile further on was the village of Casamaina, the white houses glimmering faintly against the dark side of a mountain. In another fifteen minutes we had arrived and Mario, calling for his second in command to dispose of the mules, unlatched a door and shewed me into his house.

He was a widower who looked after himself so I was half afraid that there might be a repetition of the Scheggino lodging but my fears were dispersed almost at once for he raised the kitchen fire into life and put on to boil a large pot of broth which was soon giving off very appetising smells. In what seemed no time at all the meal was ready, broth, bread, cheese and wine, fine food after a long day in the open air.

Mario and I talked of the war; he said that he had been working down near Aquila at a prison camp as a contractor and had met many English there. In fact he had done quite well out of the job in the way of perquisites and shewed me with pride the pair of British army boots that he was wearing. He said that the village of Casamaina had hardly known there was a war going on but even so the people were mortally afraid of Germans and then told me a curious story, for the truth of which I cannot vouch, though Mario insisted that it had actually happened.

It seemed that not long before I came there, one evening when all windows and doors were securely shuttered and barred against the night there came the sound of marching feet from the road where it curled round against the head of the valley before entering the village. All immediately feared the worst. The Germans were coming to search the village and their fears were not at all allayed when, as the marching footsteps came into the village, a deep voice shouted "Halt".

Mario said that the men had halted outside his house so he peeped through the curtains to see about thirty men drawn up in military formation with tommy guns slung across their shoulders and what was worse, they were wearing the round parachutists' helmets. In a moment there was a knock on the door. He opened it, with some misgivings, to find a tall man standing outside in full equipment and heavily armed, the firelight glinting on the metal. Mario wondered what his fate was to be when, to his utter surprise, the man addressed him in Italian, saying that he was the commander of a platoon of South African paratroops and he wanted lodging for his men for the night.

This was soon arranged as Mario was the head man of the village. Finding they were not the hated Germans was a great relief to everyone in the tiny village who were happy to welcome these men from such distant parts. The parachutists were parcelled out in twos and threes around the various houses, the officer remaining with Mario. He assured Mario that he and his men would be gone before dawn on the morrow. He said that they had been dropped near Terni with maps and compasses for escaping prisoners and had also carried out a demolition near there. They had been marching through enemy occupied country and would split up into twos and threes when they were nearer the fighting line. They were as good as their word and when the villagers began to stir next morning, they did indeed find their overnight guests had departed at a very early hour.

The whole affair had caught the imagination of the locals, Italians always being fond of anything in the cloak and dagger line anyway, and a great deal of good propaganda had resulted from this incident.

By the time we had discussed this fully it was time for bed and Mario shewed me into one of his barns where I snuggled down into the deep hay with a good wrapping of blankets for the night was cold with a touch of snow in the air. No sooner had I hit the hay than I was asleep, absolutely done in after the long day's march.

The 13th November was another superb morning with the promise of cold weather the night before fulfilled in the sparkling air and I could see snow on the ground further up the valley, it having been obscured by the darkness the night before when I came into the village. Mario gave me an excellent breakfast of a sort of porridge with hot milk before I left at nine o'clock. When I had discussed with him what was my best route he had told me to go on through the village, up onto and across the plain I should find and make for the village of Rovere.

CHAPATER 14.

INTO THE SNOW.

I then started on my way after thanking Mario for his help, silently voting that Casamaina stood high in the lodging house stakes. The road degenerated into a mean rough track as it left the village and I had not gone more than a quarter of a mile when I came upon a small party of men wearing khaki uniforms of Australian pattern crouched round a fire in the snow. They did not long leave me in doubt of their nationality and offered to share some of their food which they were heating over their fire but I said that I had fed adequately and pressed on after exchanging greetings. They were rather a scruffy party, appearing to lead an aimless existence due probably to lack of anyone to take charge and organise.

In another quarter of a mile I came to the edge of the plain. It was a stupendous sight. On either side there ran a range of snow covered hills some thousand feet higher than the valley in between which was dead flat, about a mile wide and four miles long also covered with snow. It was a world totally empty of humanity, indeed of any sign of life at all; there was not a house, animal or human anywhere in sight; never have I felt so absolutely on my own as at that juncture.

However it was no time for musing on the beauties or the majesty of the Italian landscape so I stepped off following a line of footprints beaten in the snow, making for a ridge where the two ranges of hills joined in the distance. One hour passed and despite stepping out smartly I hardly seemed to have made any impression on my road; another hour and I was in the centre of the valley by a shallow frozen lake. Looking back over my shoulder when I took a breather I spied another row of dots entering the plain from the direction of Casamaina, the Australians no doubt and they made very slow progress across the face of the snowy waste.

Looking around me I could see nothing but the steep sides of the hills against the blue of the sky, patterned with cloud-ships of billowy whiteness. The only signs of human life in the whole landscape besides myself were the half dozen black dots at the far edge of the valley, nothing else moved nor was there any sound but utter silence.

It was not the moment to go into a reverie for the morning air was exceedingly chilly and I wanted to see what lay beyond the ridge ahead. So I tramped on, on and on across the snow, fascinated by the crunching sound beneath the thick leather soles of my boots and at the end of another hour and a half came quite suddenly to the foot of the ridge. The path, never more than one or two rows of footprints wide now shrank to a single file as it tackled the stiff climb.

As the path gained height, and it had to ascend some three hundred feet, so the snow became deeper until it was nearly three feet deep in the drifts under the rocks and in the gullies. In a little while the gradient eased and I found myself on the top of the crest standing beneath a small group of snow-covered trees. There was beneath me another wide valley but this time free from snow with a main road running through the centre; to the right was the village of Rovere and beyond rose another hill, snow-sprinkled on its upper slopes. Away to the left across the valley of the Aterno rose the heights of the Gran Sasso shimmering in the sun.

Pushing ahead round the contours of my hill, I soon came into some grand trees, beeches I think they were, and I was following my track beneath the bare branches. After a bit I turned off down the hillside when the slopes had become more gentle and, as I had not seen anything in the way of German military traffic, thought it safe to make for the little village of Rovere for something to eat.

I was soon there and fell into conversation with some of the locals one of who said that he would take me to his house for a meal so I followed him up the side of the hill between rows of clean and tidy homes, the air fragrant with the cooking. In a moment we came to his home and entering, he introduced me to his wife asking her to give me some food and then went out again. Whether she was pleased or annoyed at having to provide for an extra mouth at such short notice I do not know but at all events I was soon invited to take a seat at the kitchen table and a large plateful of delicious boiled mutton with potatoes, cabbage, carrots and caper sauce was placed before my dazzled eyes. To me this was a meal fit for a king. A cut from a joint was more than a rarity and there was good brown bread and red wine to accompany this regal fare.

The kitchen was, for a change, pleasant and very clean. There was a new cloth on the table and all the pots and pans and the housewife were bright and shining as well. But most of these admirable details were, I regret to say, lost on me as I applied my attention to the job in hand stuffing the excellent food down my throat as if I had not had a square meal for days, which on a monthly average, was I supposed not far from the truth.

The good woman offered me some rice pudding when I had polished off the first course but I had eaten myself to a standstill, so I sat back sipping the wine, smoking and chatting with my hostess and all the while could feel the cold and weariness dropping from me like an old skin. I was anxious to find out where the next village was along my line of march so I asked her where I could make for with confidence for the night, carefully explaining that I did not want to walk along the main road nor go to places where there might be Germans.

As I had by now run off the set of maps given me by my friend Fernando Lausi of Arrone, I was again dependent on the direction of well-meaning but not always topographically experienced locals. My hostess told me to go to Secenaro, about

two or three hours walk among the hills where she said I would get a good welcome and have no bother from Germans so, not wishing to find myself in Rovere for the night, I thanked her and took my leave, much refreshed by the excellent victuals.

An Italian in the village directed me on to the path to Secenaro which turned out to be a good mule track keeping to the level ground though it was snow-covered. I had not gone far when I met a person who had all the appearance of being an escaped prisoner like myself but going in what I should have said was the wrong direction. I stopped him to ask for news of conditions further on and found that he was a Yugo-slav, about 25 years old.

I asked him where he had come from and he replied that he and his companions had been right down to the front; they had come from a camp in the north of Italy walking all the way. He said they had tried to get through the lines but there had been thousands of Germans everywhere and most of his companions had been taken prisoners again so he was going to back north again to attempt to return to Yugo-slavia that way. I thought that this was rather an easily-admitted failure after such a long walk and said so but he adhered to his statement that it was impossible to get through the lines though when I asked point blank if they had actually made any attempt, he admitted rather shame-facedly that they had not but repeated that there had been a lot of Germans about!

We then parted after mutual good wishes for success and I went on my solitary way along the snowy track wondering why such people should give up without making any real effort. I came to the conclusion that it was almost certainly the result of poor training resulting in lack of resolution when faced with difficult circumstances. One fact did stand out a mile (as I was subsequently able to verify) and that was that by far the largest number of successful crossings were made by British, Dominion or American troops while those who one thought would have been able to put local knowledge to good effect more often fell by the wayside.

I was brought out of my reverie by a most unusual sight which attracted my notice, by the side of the track. On the snow-covered bank someone had scrawled with the tip of a stick, as boys will write in the snow, ------- LIVERPOOL. It was quite recently done and I wondered whether I should meet the author. There were also the distinctive heel marks of British Army boots in the snow so apparently I was by chance following a popular route though I did not meet a soul either Italian, English or any other nationality before I came round a shoulder of the hill and saw a hundred feet beneath me the village of Secenaro in the gathering dusk.

From where I stood for a moment before I descended I had a magnificent and heartening view. And while I stood there, I heard the roar of engines; a flight

of Allied fighters swept round the corner of the hill behind me diving into the valley in search of German lorries and soon I heard the heavy chatter of their cannon firing, it was almost like the first sight of the homeland shores to the returning exile and did my morale a power of good. On my left but now a way behind rose the Gran Sasso turning purple in the twilight, the snow catching the last rays of the sun while ahead loomed the dark mass of the Maiella and a distance below in the dark valley ran the Aterno River on its way to the Adriatic.

As it was getting chilly I ran down the short way to the village but as I came into what was no doubt the main street, I saw a man, well-dressed in civilian clothes and wearing a black shirt and tie. However, I passed by him as I made a circuit of the street before I selected my lodging and when I came by him for the second time, I was astonished to hear in English,
"Say buddy, are you looking for somewhere to sleep?"

He turned out to be an American fighter pilot who had been shot down over Salerno and taken prisoner but had managed to escape before reaching a proper camp. He suggested that I join him in his billet for the night to which I readily agreed and we were soon sitting before a roaring fire swapping yarns to the amusement of the old lady who owned the house and who thought that we were brothers, I think. My friend had some cold roast chicken and other delicacies which he had acquired en route and I was invited to share these together with some hot soup produced by the lady of the house.

We sat for some time discussing the best way to get over the fighting line; I was for keeping to the hills which had stood me in such good stead while my friend said he intended to keep down into the valleys as the going was easier and I do not think that the rough sketch map we drew was very much help as it was from memory entirely. But when all was said and done, it was a very great pleasure to sit and talk English again especially with one who had been so recently on the right side of the action.

I gathered that he had been living in the neighbourhood for a little while, waiting for the weather to clear so that he could make his attempt to get back and he told me that there were quite a good number of British prisoners mostly Other Ranks who had come from the camps at Chieti and Sulmona and were living with Italian families in the hills round about; some, he had been told, had even married Italian girls. He had been in this particular village for several days and had met an Indian soldier on his way south who had come from a camp in Austria all the way by himself and without a word of any language other than his own.

At last we packed up yarning and turned in to sleep in a cosy barn where I soon fell asleep, tired out with the day's travels.

CHAPTER 15.

APPROACH MARCH.

The next morning, the 14th November, was a blustery and rainy one, a poor outlook for me without any protective clothing at all. However I was far too excited at the prospect of being among friends again in perhaps three or four days that the very idea of staying for the weather to mend was unthinkable so after a cup of tea provided by my American friend and a crust of bread I took to my heels out into the showers and wind.

There was a track leading out of the village under the side of Monte Sirente, a height of some 7000 feet which afforded some slight shelter from the strong wind. The way led up gently for a couple of miles then suddenly came out on to a high exposed plateau across which the rain and wind lashed mercilessly and as my track also led across this plateau, my clothes were all wringing wet in no time at all. But I was getting near to the end of my journey; excitement was rising as the realisation of all my hopes came nearer. Peering ahead through the mist and low cloud I fancied I could see mountains which would be in Allied hands; probably this was fallacious but it gave me great encouragement to think that beyond those rain-washed hills was the British Eighth Army.

Only forty miles or so away they were. I must not fall into the hands of the Germans at this stage and I thought of the amusement it would cause if they had caught me after travelling hundreds of miles. I determined therefore to proceed with redoubled care and commonsense. Patience in tight corners was the watchword and above all not to run senseless risks when they were unnecessary. Sodden clothes and an empty stomach meant nothing now as I pressed on at my best speed over the barren moor, my only companions a flock of goats with a small ragged urchin in attendance.

In a short while I came over the brow of a hill to find a main road from Rome to Pescara before me, carrying some considerable traffic but I noted with some dismay that apparently all approach to it could be seen from a considerable distance. But on careful reconnaissance I found that I could approach quite near by keeping along streambeds and in shallow gullies and then I found a small farm only fifty yards from the road itself. To this I went when there was a convenient gap in the traffic to beg a meal from the farmer and a few moments shelter from the elements.

I did not want to stay long nor, I think, did the farmer want to have me for long on his premises and after a short while I was out in the misty air again, looking for a way to cross safely. I soon found it, a small culvert under the road leading into a shallow ravine on the other side out of sight of the road. Down this I went, crawling on hands and knees for part of the way, down the

ravine a short way then up the far side at a gallop and, having reached the top of the bank, halted to regain my breath.

I found that I was safely over the road and that any ill-wishing German would have to cross the ravine first thus giving me a good many minutes valuable start but there were none in sight save a gun being towed up the hill from the east. On again but in half a mile I came unexpectedly upon another road winding in loops and coils up from the valley. I thought the coast was clear but as I crossed the road I suddenly saw on the loop below, only a few feet beneath me, a German motorcycle combination carrying two leather-clad figures with a machine gun on the sidecar.

In a flash I calculated that I had about five seconds before they rounded a corner to come towards me when they would assuredly spot me and realise what I was. My eye, subconsciously I think, saw a hollow in the grass about twenty yards ahead in the centre of a loop in the road and I ran to this in even time, throwing myself headlong into the soaking grass hoping that I would blend sufficiently into the landscape to get away with it.

I could hear the purring of the twin cylinder engine as it swept round a bend and came past where I had just crossed the road. Would it stop? Would there be a sudden shouted challenge? Would my long and tedious journey come to an end on the rain-swept slopes of this unnamed mountain and all have been in vain? The roar momentarily increased as the machine swept past the end of the little gulley wherein I lay concealed and began to fade away as it climbed further up the hill. The reaction then set in and for a minute I lay there thanking my lucky stars for that escape, by no means the last that day, did I but know it then.

Getting to my feet I peered cautiously around to make sure there was no one with malice aforethought prowling in the vicinity and being satisfied that the coast was clear, I went on again. I had to cross two more loops of this road before I was clear away but there was no sign of any more Germans and there was no more bother. I directed my steps across to the side of another steep hill with the intention of following the contours to save energy in going up and down but soon found myself in almost impenetrable brush through which it was so difficult to penetrate that I was forced to descend some considerable distance in order to circumvent this obstacle.

As I came round the brow of the hill I could see the mist swirling round in the valley of the Aterno below but ahead of me there rose another hill with the rain driving across in sheets. I struggled up to the top to find that the ground fell away even more steeply the other side down to the small village of Cocullo though there appeared to be a chance of working my way along the steep hillside to the right of the place. The whole view reminded me of Dante's

Inferno. I had not gone many yards when I came upon an Italian crouching behind a bush and a little further on there were some more in similar positions who motioned me to sit down beside them.

I then noticed dozens of heads peering from behind neighbouring bushes and became very curious to know what was going on so asked one of the Italians what it was all about. He pointed to the village several hundred feet below, seemingly quiet and peaceful, saying that there was a German party there collecting "volunteers" for the Todt Organisation and that the adult male population, not wishing to shew their appreciation for the idea had taken to the hills until the danger was past.

Sure enough, on closer inspection I could see some German trucks parked in the little square and parties of men in field-grey moving from house to house but by the numbers of heads I could see around me, I should estimate that the harvest would be among the poorer ones. On enquiry as to how often these evasive methods had to be resorted to, I was told that on the average it was necessary to take to the hills about once a month. They had got things pretty well organised in that the next village down the road would telephone up when there was any German vehicle on the prowl so that it was only the sluggards who ran any risks of being caught.

The Germans appeared to get tired of their wild goose chase after about half an hour and the lorries were again on their way down the hill, devoid of any volunteers. The coast being then clear I bethought myself of going on again and asked my Italian friend if he could advise me where I might find lodging in about another five kilometres walk down the valley. He told me to go to the village of Castrovalva which could just be seen perched on a crag in the middle distance among the swirling mists. Thanking him, I started on my way along the side of the hill but was very soon compelled to abandon my plan when the slope became almost a precipice and there was the further hazard of a rocky scree so there was nothing for it but to go down and hope for a way along at a lower level.

Again I was disappointed and finally was forced down to the road along which I walked for a mile or more until I heard a car approaching and took to the fields. There was a small river whose banks afforded a good path away from the road and this I followed. The scenery ahead opened out more but almost defied description; running parallel with me on the right was the ridge I had just left but it became a sheer rock face of grey granite, the rain glistening and the mists wreathing and sliding among the gullies. Three or four miles ahead the ridge met another wall of mountains at right angles and where they came together dark clouds sat on the crests, more wisps of grey cloud billowed between them angrily. The whole landscape glowered and frowned terrifyingly on mere man and all his works.

More than a slight feeling of foreboding came over me as I made my slow way into the cauldron of mountain, cloud and rain with a heavy grey sky over all but go on I must for I was again well away from houses and signs of life. Another couple of miles brought me to the bottom of the valley where ran a main road and a boiling river, the Pescara. The former I had no difficulty in crossing since the filthy weather had driven most of the Germans indoors but the river presented some difficulty until I noticed a bridge by a mill two hundred yards to my right and I was soon over this as well.

Nearby was the town of Anversa which at that time was a post of some importance to the enemy being the last town of any size at all before the actual fighting line some ten miles to the south. Three hundred feet above me, perched on a rocky crag was Castrovalva like a fairy-tale village but it seemed a discouragingly long way at the end of the day, tired as I was and wet through with the sodden clothing chafing my skin at every step but I must climb the hill to the village or stay wet in the open for the night.

With each yard of the steep path my will-power began to flag; a voice inside me seemed to say "Sit down and rest awhile". But I knew that should I do this, I should feel far more tired when I rose to go on. I had eaten nothing but a couple of crusts since breakfast and it was then after five; I had walked about eighteen miles of really mountainous country in rain and sleet, in short I was just about all in.

Somehow as dusk was falling I found myself on the mountain road leading down into Castrovalva from the back of the village and when I came to the first house, I knocked to ask for shelter. I could not have gone to the next had I been refused, I was so exhausted.

In a moment the door was opened by a bent old woman who bade me enter without further ado and when I told her that I was an English officer, she said she would do all that she could for me and shewed me messages left by previous travellers, some of whom happened to be friends of mine, telling of her kindness. There was a good fire roaring in the chimney and I am afraid that I made straight for this and stood in front, my clothes steaming furiously while Maria Divito, as her name was, went to prepare some hot food.

Sitting over the meal when it came, I told her briefly about my journeyings and said how excited I was that I was finally on the last stage of my trip. She said that the fighting was only on the other side of the mountains, about fifteen miles in a direct line. She added that many English had come through the village and all the Italians were anxious to do everything they could to help, though, and this with a sly grin, some were more helpful than others. I asked if she knew anyone who could give me some information as to the best route to be followed for the last stage and she told me that a man was coming

to see her presently who might be able to assist.

It occurred to me that as there was a perfectly good road up from Anversa which cars could use, even though it was steep, that Germans might be in the habit of paying unwelcome visits but Maria assured me that it was quite all right. They seldom came, she said, and when they did there was always ample warning either from the roaring of the motors or from a friendly phone call in good time from friends below.

As we were sitting before the fire after supper there was a knock on the door which opened to admit a large florid Italian. He was the visitor Maria had referred to earlier on and gave me a great deal of useful information. Firstly he said that the German line ran through Alfedena and Castel di Sangro and that the line was believed to be lightly held; secondly that there were several other English people in the village waiting for a good break in the weather and thirdly that an Italian guide was due to return from the Allied line to take over another party. This was thrilling news indeed and I said I would make contact in the morning.

My clothes had dried so I asked to be shewn where I could sleep. Maria took me with some blankets to a barn up the road shewing me where the hay was thickest and there were the fewest draughts then, wishing me a good night she left me to my own devices. As I lay there in the deep warm hay there came through the frosty air the distant rumble of guns, British guns - our own troops in action against the Germans. The thought of what it meant reeled through my brain, freedom from danger of recapture, good food inside me and warm clothes on me; friends and relations; letters, contact again with people of my own race and the chance of another go at the Germans. I must not fail at the last fence having come so far, I must get through. In my excitement the wild thought came to me of leaving there and then; perhaps if all went well I would be through by morning. The idea nearly won me over but in the end my body in its weariness triumphed and I sank into a deep slumber.

I awoke to find the rain still streaming down, sheets of grey water pouring from a grey sky without a sign of a break at all. After I had eaten some breakfast I went in search of the other English people and found them in the house the Italian had indicated the previous night. There was an R.A.F. Sergeant pilot with three South Africans playing cards round the fire with the Italian guide sorting out his belongings in a corner; he had only returned some few hours previously and was already anxious to make the trip over again but he said the weather was turning bad and there was snow in the mountains.

When I asked if I might join the party the Sergeant, by name Bill said he would be delighted to have me with them and we settled down to a good yarn about our experiences to date. The guide told us that his route was open but in all

probability we would have to spend one night on the way and told me to have myself ready for instant departure if the weather should improve sufficiently. This did not present much of a problem as I always carried all my possessions on me at all times.

After the midday meal I made my way with Bill to a house at the end of the village where there was a wireless to hear the news with special reference to our bit of the front. There was little of fresh interest applicable to the Italian front, only confirmation of the news that fighting was going on near Castel di Sangro but there was good tidings from the Russian front. The little room in the house where the wireless was situated was crowded with Italians who shewed their delight when any bad news for the Germans was given.

Being in great need of a smoke and being unable to get any cigarettes by begging from the Italians, I decided to spend some of the lire on a couple of packets, the lire which I had been able to preserve intact since I began the trip. The cigarettes were black market and therefore many lire had to be expended to little effect but I was very glad of them.

The rest of the day was spent either chatting with Bill and his party or sitting in front of Maria's fire toasting my toes while the rain streamed down outside turning the road into a mountain freshet. I was somewhat perturbed at the continued rainfall for it meant that there would be snow falling on the upper slopes of the mountains which we would have to cross and if the weather turned really nasty we might well have been marooned in Castrovalva for months.

Maria produced for my gratification during the evening something which she called chocolate but turned out to be dried solidified pig's blood. It looked rather like chocolate and smelled a bit like it also but the taste was very rich and sick-making so that I could manage to consume only a small amount. I think the old lady was disappointed but it was a very acquired taste. That night before I went to sleep I could again hear the rumble of the guns and imagined that I could identify the rapid bark of twenty-five pounders through the medley of sound.

The next morning the 16th November dawned grey with rain which again continued without stopping all day. During the morning I had another session with Bill and his party and the guide but he regretfully decided to postpone the start for another twenty four hours. We again all went to hear the B.B.C. news but there was nothing further of interest and I returned to sit in front of the fire and commune with my thoughts.

About four o'clock I was roused from my day dreams by a knocking on the door and when it opened there entered two persons looking for all the world like drowned rats. They turned out to be two friends of mine from Fontanellato,

Nigel and Archie who told me that they had made an attempt to get through the line but had been defeated by the ghastly weather. I have never seen anyone before or since so wet through and covered with mud and in addition their clothes and boots were in the last stages of decay whilst they themselves were in poor shape from lack of food and exposure.

Maria rose to the occasion once again and had some hot food ready in no time at all while they stripped off their sodden clothes as far as possible and toasted themselves before the fire. On comparing notes we found that our routes had been very much the same but they had been about four days ahead of me all the time. They had not had any trouble but their footwear being Italian wartime shoes had almost collapsed, making walking painful in the extreme. They also told me that there was another party of Fontanellato-ites in a small village in the mountains ahead sheltering from the appalling weather.

After supper, just as we were thinking of turning in, there was another knock on the door and a couple of young Italians came in carrying suitcases; they were ex-soldiers, self-demobilised on their way home to the south of Italy and to say the least they were not very welcome to Maria who had enough on her hands already but she said that she would give them somewhere to sleep. Their arrival in the hay-loft together with their large suitcases took up far more than their fair share as they spread themselves well about; Archie, Nigel and I gave them as wide a berth as possible as they did not seem over-clean.

They were very enthusiastic about getting over the line and announced that they were going to come with us as the guide had apparently told them that they might. Selfishly, we took a poor view of this as the more undisciplined members of such an enterprise could easily wreck the whole thing, as in fact these lads and others of their kind nearly did. Eventually we all dropped off to sleep, hoping for fine weather on the morrow.

CHAPTER 16.

THE LAST LAP.

17th November.

When morning came we saw that it was not actually raining though the sky was overcast and after a light breakfast we all went down to Bill's house to hear what was afoot. They were all making their final preparations as the guide said he was going to make a start that morning. By nine o'clock the whole party was assembled in the road; there were all told about twenty British, South Africans and Americans the latter being two pilot officers but to our unfeigned dismay there were sixty or more Italian civilians, most of whom were carrying suitcases of varying bulk and stages of decomposition all lashed up with cords and string. It was very noticeable that all the Allied personnel were travelling light and even a rucksack was a rarity bearing out the old motto that he who travels light travels fastest.

A sub-committee was formed for planning purposes which consisted of the guide, Bill, Archie and myself and we decided that for the first stage of the march, at any rate to San Lorenzo the Italian element should go in front, that the column should be made up of small parties of five or six with an interval of about 50 yards between each and that we should stay the night at San Lorenzo which was a ruined, uninhabited village approximately half way. After a good deal of argument some of it decidedly unfriendly, the party formed up and got under way to the good wishes of the crowd and as we passed her door, I thought I saw a tear in the eyes of kind old Maria. Her example of assistance with the Germans so near to the village was one which could well have been followed by some of the fainter hearts I had met on my journey.

Slowly we wound out of the village like a tired snake up the narrow path along the hillside, a wonderful feeling coming over me that here I was at last on the ultimate stage of the journey, surely nothing must go wrong now. For two hours we climbed steadily into the mountains through pine forests until we arrived at a battered looking village called Frattura where the inhabitants poured forth from their houses to gape at us and enquire where we were going; to these questions, in order to allay any suspicion in their minds, we answered that we were going into the mountains to eat snow! The Fratturans were very anti-German for they had suffered two "sweeps" in the last few days one for labourers and the other for pigs and geese and their village situated on a small level place on the side of a mountain shewed considerable signs of wear and tear.

The weather had cleared up though the sun was not strong enough to disperse the clouds but it was sufficiently good to let those who were so inclined enjoy the fine scenery. On our left there was a long ridge of a mountain, barren and boulder-strewn rising two thousand feet above us. Below on our right the ground

fell away sharply into the valley of the infant Pescara river running there between steep walls of rock, fir trees here and there managing to effect a lodgment on the precipitous face and sometimes we could catch a glimpse of the road winding along beside the torrent. Beyond the river the mountains rose sheer for thousands of feet, their tops dusted with snow. Through this almost fairy landscape our column dragged its slow length along the stony path, the air fragrant with the scent of pines.

We passed through a belt of pines and when we came out the other side I noticed a man walking down the hillside towards us, an unusual sight in a countryside barren of life. He was tall and dressed in dark blue breeches with a huge blue coat and a cossack fur cap. As he came within speaking distance he called out in English with a North American accent, "Say, where are you boys going?" We were amazed both by his rig and by the language but recovered sufficiently to give a non-committal answer till we discovered more about the stranger. He said that he was "Intelligence, Canadian Army" by way of explanation and we then said we were on our way back across the lines after having spent varying periods behind bars. He then revealed that he was operating a radio station with the assistance of two Italian officers whom we could see further up the hill sitting under some trees and asked us to tell the I-Branch when we got across that he had been sending for two days without any answer from the other side. We said we would be pleased to do this, then wishing us all good luck he hurried back up the hill to his post.

The afternoon wore on with the column making very slow progress and from time to time we overtook Italian members of the party frienzedly making first aid repairs to their dilapidated suitcases. It struck me very forcibly how these folk were really far more concerned with getting their goods and chattels safely through than with making certain of their own escape; how much more successful they would have been if they had left their chattels with some friend near the line and came back for them when the battle had rolled beyond, but no, they preferred to do the thing in their stupid way like this.

It was nearly dusk when we followed the rest of the column over a low ridge to find the village of San Lorenzo in a small plateau just below us. It was a small collection of grey stone huts, devoid of life but probably used in the summer months by shepherds pasturing their flocks on the upper slopes of the mountains. The head of the column stopped when it had reached the centre of the village to allow the tail to catch up. The guide then came to us to say that we were to stay there the night and that there was enough shelter for all provided we crowded several deep into the half dozen or so habitable huts, then with a word that he would be ready to start at dawn on the morrow he betook himself into what, no doubt, was the warmest and least draughty of the

buildings.

At this moment, while I was standing talking to Bill by a small hut, four tramp-like objects came out through what served as a door three of whom I immediately recognised as former inmates of Fontanellato camp. They welcomed me as well as Archie and Nigel, bidding us to share their hut with them for the night; Bill said he would go with the guide so we said good night and he went off in the dusk. The seven of us then went into the hut where there was a fine fire blazing and we settled down to a good yarn. The fourth member of the new party was a young Dutchman whose story read like a fable.

When the Germans invaded Holland he was a student at one of the Universities but took to his heels when the bombing began. In time he was forcibly enrolled by the enemy and, because of his education, posted as a clerk to some farming organisation as a book-keeper. This he had stuck for a couple of years then hearing on the B.B.C. of the exploits of the Free Dutch Navy, was possessed of the determination to escape from the occupied countries to England, join the Navy and fight the Germans. He therefore began to make careful plans; he saved as much of his meagre pay as he could until he had what he judged was enough for his purposes. He began to hoard canned food and saved as much of his rations as possible for the trip. Then when all was favourable, he slipped down to the local railway station one day at the end of a week's work and booked a ticket to the frontier station on the Brenner Pass route. He had a few days holiday due to him as well as the weekend so that his presence would not be missed for several days.

That night he took the train and travelled without any bother or trouble right through the length of Germany to the Italian frontier where he got out and without difficulty crossed into Italy on foot. At the first available station he took a ticket for Rome which he eventually reached after some exciting confrontations with Allied aircraft en route. In Rome he found some Italians who advised him to make for the mountains as the best way of getting to the Allied lines and a couple of weeks walking brought him to San Lorenzo where he met my other friends.

These friends had made fair progress from the north but like many others were troubled by their Italian footwear periodically dropping to bits though they had had one hair-raising encounter with the enemy. It had happened about a week previous to our meeting them when they had been walking with Archie and Nigel that they had spent the night in a small hut on a mountain. As they were turning in an Italian civilian, rather scruffy-looking came to the door and asked whether he and a friend might share their hut for the night to which they replied that they would be glad to have them.

The Italian then brought in a tall fair man in civilian clothes also who was introduced as being an escapee. He spoke bad Italian and no English but Archie & Co., though slightly suspicious, did nothing and all went to sleep. In the morning they were getting the meal and everyone was wandering about on some job or other when they momentarily missed the two strangers. Suddenly, when my friends were sitting in the hut eating, the fair one appeared in the doorway with an automatic in his hand and the Italian behind him with a hand grenade at the ready.

In bad English the German, for that he was, told them to put up their hands and come into the open. Being utterly defenceless they had no option and soon they were being marched down the track on their way to the nearest German troops, the German explaining in execrable Italian that he was a member of their secret Field Police. Archie & Co. discovered that neither the German nor the Italian understood any English beyond a few words so they began to make a plan of campaign talking rapidly and using the longest words they could think of.

They were walking in two parties; the German in front with one on each side his pistol at the ready, one by himself in the middle and the other two on each side of the Italian bringing up the rear, the Italian having put his grenade in a pocket. It was agreed that on a given signal the three in front were to go for the Hun and the other two tackle the Iti, the signal being when the two at the rear should call out to those in front to pass a cigarette.

The group was then walking along a footpath between some fields, there was nobody else in sight when the signal was given. The one in the centre tackled the German round the ankles while the other two fell upon him on each side and he fell to the ground in a melee of arms and legs, his pistol going off into the earth without damage to anyone; the Italian taken utterly by surprise gave in without a struggle but his companion in arms fought like a madman and was only subdued with considerable difficulty. The procession then formed up again but in different order; the German and the Italian being frogmarched at the point of the gun back to the hut. The former took the change of fortune as one of the chances of war but the latter was whimpering and crying like a baby through fright, probably thinking he was going to be shot out of hand.

On arrival at the hut the two were very securely tied up and stripped of all their clothes which were then destroyed and with a word of farewell my friends departed leaving the two to their own devices. They hurried along coming soon to an Italian police post where they gave the news of the discomfiture of the German to some highly-delighted policeman who said that

they would attend to the couple in the hut. Booty arising from this engagement was a Luger pistol, a pair of excellent field-glasses which came in handy later and the hand grenade. I gathered that this successful battle raised the prestige of the Allies greatly in those parts!

Darkness had fallen by the time this tale was told and further fuel was then obtained for the fire; food was also in hand in the form of potatoes roasting in their jackets in the hot ashes and a joint stewing in an old pot over the fire, a joint cut from an old cow which had died in calf that evening, tough but edible none the less. As the evening wore on so the cold became more intense and when we all went out for a breath of fresh air, the sky was spangled with stars and the southern horizon lit with the flashes of the guns their rumble coming to us over the snowy peaks. Shivering, we darted back into our hovel to the fire and the hot potatoes.

The interior measured only some twelve feet square so that with a large fire burning against one side, there was not a great deal of room for the seven of us. The floor consisted of rough earth and dried dung and against another wall was a pile of hay which came in most useful. But about all that could be said in its favour was that it afforded shelter from the bitter winds moaning round the corners outside. However we sat in a half circle chatting, round the fire eating our saltless stew and baked potatoes, the flickering firelight playing on our faces while we made our plans for the great day tomorrow. One by one we dropped off into uneasy slumber, one braced against the rough wall, another lying in the hay and others on the floor wherever there was space and all the while the grumble and mutter of the guns came through to us on the wings of the icy wind, beckoning and guiding the wanderers back to the fold.

Almost before I was asleep it seemed to be dawn. There were shouts and calls outside so we went out to see the first preparations being made but had time to eat another potato or two still warm in the embers to break our fasts. Bill came over with the guide to have a word before we started; the guide said that we should have several hours walk through snow before we surmounted the hills overlooking the Sangro valley and gave it as his estimate that we might be at the river in about ten hour's time. We arranged a different order of march for the day, this time having the Allied contingent in front with the Italians bringing up the rear because if trouble was met it was more than likely that the civilians might panic and furthermore, they could not be expected to know the meaning of silent travel and inconspicuous approach.

The first pearly grey harbingers of the dawn were in the eastern sky as the motley column gathered amongst the houses, the Italians chattering excitedly, the Allied soldiers for the most part quietly talking among themselves while at one side lay a horse frozen stiff during the night so cold had it been. The guide took a last look round to see that all were ready then at a word began to move off away from the village up a steep and narrow cleft to the south.

In a minute the gradient steepened and the only sounds to be heard were the heavy breathing of the party and the ringing of boots on stones as we climbed steadily upwards. The serene clearness of the night was not carried forward into the new day, the sky did not portend rain but for the moment it was grey and overcast. Up and up we went slowly but steadily for two hours, sometimes through small pine woods, sometimes across rough tussocky grass and sometimes over stones and boulders until we were finally above the tree line. Then the first traces of snow appeared in sheltered corries. Soon there was a general sprinkling everywhere and as we reached the neck of the cleft its depth on the path rapidly increased, then we came out into the open as the sun burst through the clouds and found ourselves in a dazzling white landscape as far as the eye could see. The snow was lying three to four feet deep, the guide leading the way and trampling a path going up to his knees each time he took a step.

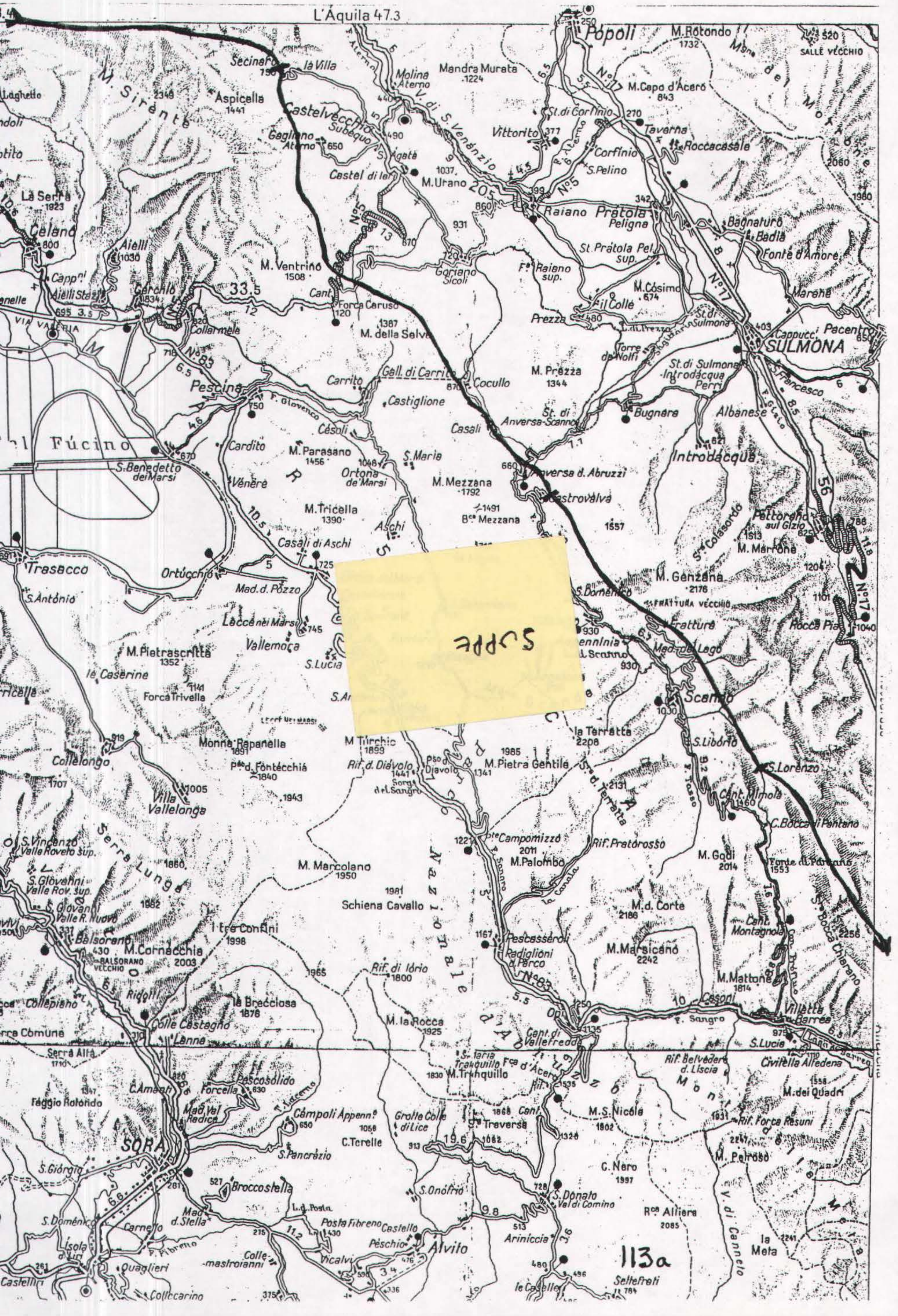
Suddenly there was a great barking of dogs almost under our feet which puzzled me greatly until the guide pointed out a little way ahead the roof of a hut almost level with the snow, explaining that this was the lodging of a game warden whose duty it was to patrol the game reserve through which we were passing though about the only thing I did not see that day was deer. The guide went into the hut to ask the warden for news; there was nothing to report, no patrols, no excitements, nothing but he explained to us later that the Germans had been known to send ski patrols periodically over the mountains and, later on, we saw the tracks made by them. He advised us if any appeared that the best thing to do was for everyone to scatter in different directions, some might be caught but the majority would escape; we preferred no patrols to come rather than try this scheme.

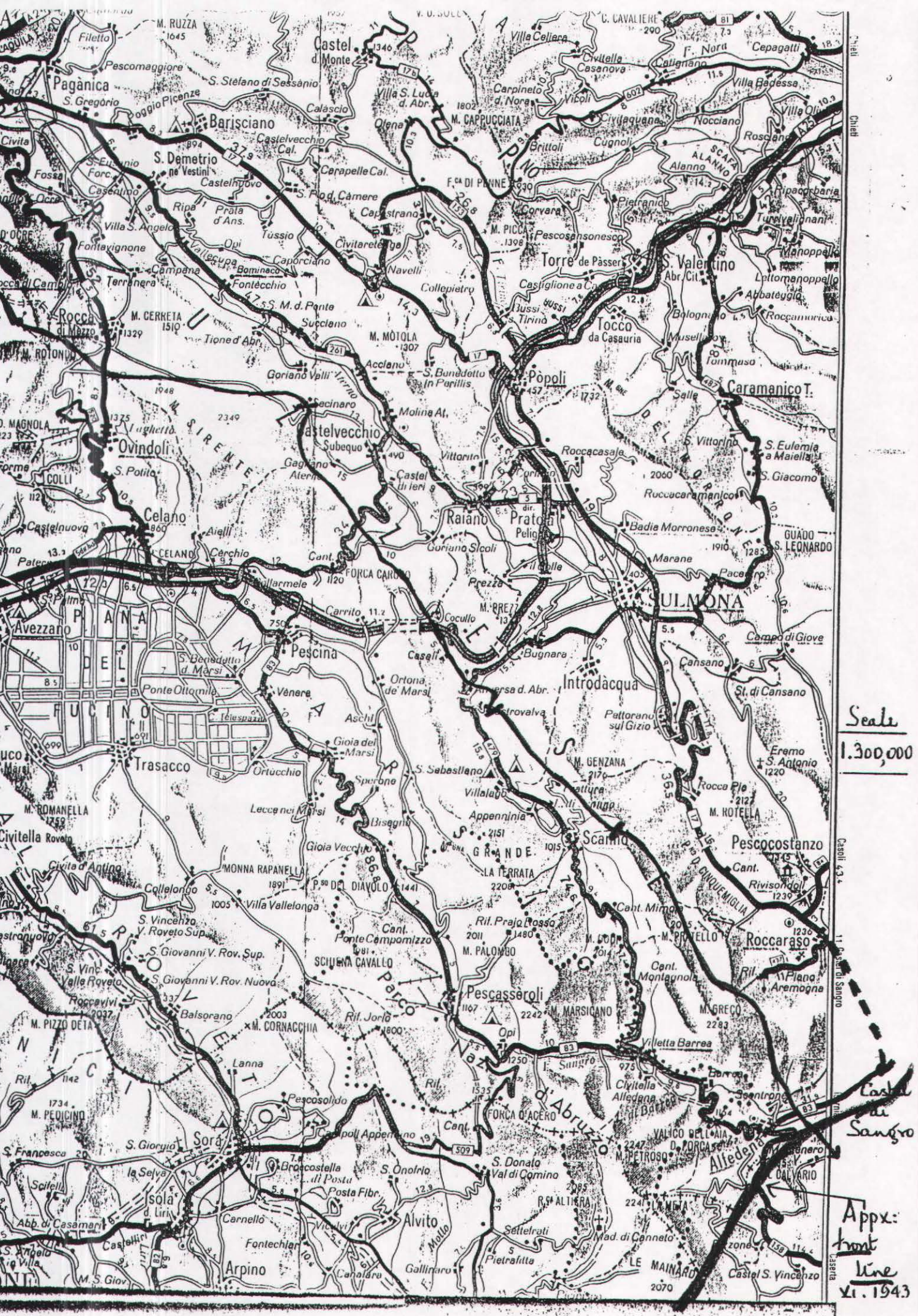
Like an over-stretched worm our column gradually caught up on itself when the head stopped at the entrance to the hut, a buzz of enquiring conversation rising as the climbers regained their breath and took a rest after the last steep ascent. A small cloud of mist from our breathing hung on the air, arms were flapped against sides to restore circulation, feet stamped on the snowy ground to keep them warm for walking while the owners of the arms, legs

and feet took the opportunity to give similar rein to their tongues for there was now a sense of excitement and thrill in the sight of the snow-clad ranges striding away into the distance under the brilliant sun and the thought that beyond the hills lay the German Army entrenched against the Allies, the Wehrmacht through which we must pass or call our enterprise a failure.

I personally felt the excitement of the moment mount within me because through my army training I was visualising what might lie over the snowy crest. It was on the cards that there was a series of entrenched positions with barbed wire and mines; there might be guard dogs, hungry and waiting to pounce on such as ourselves; the river Sangro might be too deep to ford or too rapid; once across we might be fired on by our own side when within an ace of success. My imagination ran on, perhaps when the next dawn came we might be lying dead across barbed wire or we might be prisoners again but through all these wild ranges of fantasy there was at the back of my mind the firm conviction that I should get through safely.

I was a believer in the old theory that in war every man has his name on some bullet and if that bullet missed its mark then he was all right. When I had been in the campaign in Crete in 1941 there was a bad air raid one night shortly before the German parachute attack; during a lull I decided to pay a visit to the section posts of my platoon because a string of bombs had fallen across the platoon area. They were time-delay ones, some of which had gone off and I thought I would proceed on my way but a sixth sense told me to keep my head down for a second longer though I imagined all the bombs in the vicinity had exploded. Gingerly I lifted my head to the edge of the shallow pit in which I was taking cover when the black of the night was suddenly rent by a fearful blinding flash, a thunderous roar and a fountain of dust and rocks as a bomb detonated within a few yards of me. I measured it next day finding that the centre of the explosion of the 250 lb. bomb had been six feet from the brim of my steel helmet. I decided thereafter that as it could not have been closer without writing me off, that one must have had my name on it.


L'Aquila 47.3
Popoli
M. Rotondo 1732
Secinaro
la Villa
M. Sirente
Aspicella 1441
Castelvecchio Subequo
Gagliano Aterno
Molina Aterno
Mandra Murata 1224
V. di S. Venanzio
St. di Corfinio
Vittorito
Corfinio
Taverna
Roccacasale
S. Pelino
M. Capo d'Acero 843
Castel di Ieri
M. Urano
La Serra 1923
Celano
Aielli
Raiano
Pratola Peligna
St. Pratola Pel. sup.
Bagnaturo
Badia
Fonte d'Amore
M. Ventrino 1508
Goriano Sicoli
Raiano sup.
M. Cosimo 674
il Colle
Marane
Forca Caruso
M. della Selva
Collarmele
Prezza
St. di Sulmona
SULMONA
Pacentro
Cappucc.
Torre de' Nolfi
M. Prezza 1344
St. di Sulmona -Introdacqua
Pescina
Carrito
Gall. di Carrito
Cocullo
Castiglione
F. Giovenco
Bugnara
Albanese
Fúcino
S. Benedetto dei Marsi
Cardito
M. Parasano 1456
Cesoli
Casali
St. di Anversa-Scanno
Introdacqua
Venere
S. Maria
Ortona de' Marsi
M. Mezzana 1792
Anversa d. Abruzzi
Castrovalva
Pettorano sul Gizio
M. Tricella 1390
Bca Mezzana
Aschi
Casali di Aschi
M. Marrone
Trasacco
Ortucchio
M. Genzana 2176
S. Domenico
Frattura Vecchio
S. Antonio
Mad. d. Pozzo
Frattura
Rocca Pia
Lecce nei Marsi
Vallemora
Mad. del Lago
M. Pietrascritta 1352
S. Lucia
le Caserine
Forca Trivella
Scanno
la Terratta 2208
Monna Rapanella
M. Turchio 1899
S. Liborio
S. Lorenzo
Collelongo
Pdo d. Fontecchia 1840
Rif. d. Diavolo
M. Pietra Gentile
Cant. Olmola
Villa Vallelonga
Sorg. d. Sangro
C. Bocca di Pantano
S. Vincenzo Valle Roveto Sup.
Serra Lunga
Campomizzo 2011
Rif. Pratorosso
M. Palombo
M. Godi 2014
Forte di Pantano 1553
S. Giovanni Valle Rov. sup.
M. Marcolano 1950
S. Giovanni Valle R. Nuova
Schiena Cavallo
M. d. Corte 2186
Cant. Montagnola
Balsorano
I tre Confini 1998
Pescasseroli
M. Marsicano 2242
M. Cornacchia 2003
Radiglioni di Parco
Rif. di Iorio 1800
M. Mattone 1814
Collepiano
Ridotti
la Brecciosa 1876
Opi
Villetta Barrea
Nazionale d'Abruzzo
Casoni
Serra Comune
Colle Castagno
Lenna
M. la Rocca 1925
Cant. di Vallefredda
S. Lucia
Civitella Alfedena
Serra Alta 1710
Rif. Belvedere d. Liscia
C. Amati
Forcella
Pescosolido
M. Tranquillo
M. dei Quadri
Faggio Rotondo
Mad. Val Radice
Campoli Appenn.
Grotte Colle di Lice
Traversa
M. S. Nicola
Rif. Forca Resuni
C. Terelle
SORA
S. Pancrazio
M. Petroso
S. Giorgio
C. Nero 1997
Broccostella
S. Onofrio
S. Donato Val di Comino
Rca Alliera 2085
S. Domenico
Carnello
Mad. d. Stella
Posta Fibreno
Castello
Arinicchia
Isola d. Liri
Peschio
Alvito
la Meta
V. di Canneto
Quaglieri
Colle-mastroianni
Vicalvi
Castelliri
Collecarino
le Caselle
Settefrati
113a


Scale
1.300,000
Appx: front line XI. 1943
Castel di Sangro

CHAPTER 17.

THE LAST LAP - 11.

18th November.

In five minutes the guide had found out all that he could from the game warden and called to the column to reform and continue. He said that there was another house to which we would come in another two hours where we could make fires and warm ourselves and rest. Thus speaking he swung his rucksack on to his back and strode off, with the rest following in their parties at intervals.

Away we trudged in the snow following the guide like a snake over the brow of a ridge when we saw the whole of the upper valley laid out before us clad in shimmering white, not a sign of any kind of life apparent except a hut in the middle distance, its dark brown form breaking the landscape. Occasionally we met old ski tracks but for the most part the sparkling sheen of the snow was unmarked and reflected the bright sun with a million dancing facets of light so that I had to screw up my eyes against the glare.

The snow being two feet deep and more, it often spilled over the tops of my boots and I was soon walking in a pool of water inside them and the bottom of my trousers were encrusted with ice. Looking round I could see the column winding across the snowfield but some of the Italians were making very heavy weather and finding, no doubt, that their bulging suitcases were hardly worth the labour of carrying while in contrast the Allied contingent were travelling well. Suddenly I heard the sound of aeroplane engines above the crunch of boots and moan of the wind and a small formation of fighters, the red, white and blue roundels on their wings catching the sun, swept over the snow-clad peak across the valley, banking this way and that as they kept their watch for Germans.

It was a great moment to see our friends so near but the thought struck me that we might be mistaken for a German column for at that height and speed they could not possibly tell whether we were friend or foe and the fact that we had adopted a military formation might have attracted more attention than we desired. But it seemed that we were in luck's way for with a final swoop they banked away out of sight over the ridge and were gone, leaving us again to the silence of the arctic.

Slowly, slowly we ate up the distance to the hut, making our way around the edge of a frozen lake until we reached the sanctuary. Though there was no fire there nor any one living in the place, it seemed very warm after the snows outside so all crowded in, stamping their feet to shake off the snow and dumping their loads on the floor to ease their arms and shoulders. Eager hands unpacked food from pockets and haversacks and those with food shared

it with those who were without any. The mutual warmth created by so many bodies within the confined space helped to thaw out those who were cold and loosened tongues until the room seemed on the way to rival the tower of Babel.

In half an hour appetites had been satisfied and thirsts quenched from the well water when the guide made signs that he wanted to continue. Before we left, however, Archie, Bill and I had a word with him to try to get some idea of what was coming; he explained that when we got over the next crest the path led down all the way and we should be able to see the Allied-held country laid out before us. He said that he hoped to be able to get through by his usual route which the warden had confirmed was still open when asked about it earlier in the morning. We then held a small council of war amongst ourselves and passed round instructions that groups should not exceed six in numbers and that there must be at least fifty metres between each so that if the head ran into trouble, those further from the storm centre would have a better chance of escape.

The Italians did not take kindly to this minor example of discipline but they eventually agreed to do as we told them. So there was a general upheaval as loads were taken up and groups marshalled by their leaders, the guide moved towards the door and in a moment we were out again in the sun and snow. He led us along the foot of Monte Greco towering more than a thousand feet above on our right, past the lake and up towards a ridge through deep snow. As we toiled up the steep slope the snow became deeper, first half way up our calves, then to our knees and finally we were thrusting through thigh-deep drifts. It was agonisingly slow going and I sensed the precious daylight slipping away as we all wallowed among the whiteness, ever struggling upwards.

But the hard going effected one good result for, if the Italians tended to bunch together on the level, the slope opened them out as the less physically fit among them laboured up with their bags and cases. As we approached the summit the wind began to sweep down over the ridge with ever-increasing velocity and its chill breath cut through my damp clothing like a sharp knife making me shiver even though I was sweating profusely from the exertions of the climb. Also as we approached the summit, the depth of the drifted snow lessened until when we at last reached the top we were walking on bare black rock, the snow only lying in nooks and crannies where it had escaped the sweeping action of the wind.

I felt a great thrill go through me then as, after months of wandering and hundreds of miles, I at last looked down on to country where there were

Allied troops. It was an indescribable sensation to stand where we did on the summit of this range, amid the snows, and look down on a vast expanse of dark green country knowing that over there lay the end of our journey. We were on the very last lap and I confess that I uttered a silent prayer for safe going over the final few miles. We knew that the enemy were entrenched just below us but just where, we should soon find out.

Here the column stopped for some ten minutes beneath a small group of storm-bent trees while the guide went on ahead to scout the lie of the land. In the meanwhile I swept the country with my eyes for any signs of life but there were none. The guide returned, indicating that it was safe to proceed, so once more the column came to life.

As we descended in single file, the trees became denser and we were soon marching down a very narrow rough and steep defile into a forest. Silence was ordered but it was almost impossible to clamber down among the rocks and boulders without an accompanying crash of stones and an occasional oath as a shin was torn on an outcrop of rock. Down and down we went turning, twisting and tumbling over and among the boulders until the guide signed to us to stop while he went ahead again.

He was gone ten minutes and when he returned his face was long and he looked depressed and worried. Bill and I went to ask what was the matter and he explained that, a hundred yards on he had come round a corner to find a party of Germans cutting wood, effectively blocking the route. He thought that way was unsafe and said that there was another route further to the east which he would try.

I then asked what we had better do, remembering that the column was in single file with the Allied contingent in front and that for us to double back on ourselves would be a most complicated manoeuvre through the very narrow path upon which we were placed and the guide said that it would be better for him alone to clamber back and for the tail end of the column to become the front. Both Bill and I received this idea with considerable apprehension since it would mean that the Allied section would now be at the back but we realised the impossibility of doing anything else and in the events which followed, it turned out to have been the best for us.

The guide then left us and made his way slowly and with difficulty past the length of the column through the stones and boulders up the narrow path while we at the end sat down again to wait until the time came to move on. We conversed in quiet undertones for we could hear the ringing of the axes on the trees below us and occasionally the crash of falling timber as the Germans gathered their firewood.

Ten minutes passed, then half an hour and still no signs of movement in the column so we decided to copy the example of the guide and go back on our tracks so with difficulty we made our way up to the top of the gorge, telling the Italians to follow in due course. At the top we found that the men at the end had failed to follow the guide, who had gone on by himself, saying that they had been afraid to go on! Bill and I were absolutely livid for we were now without anyone who knew the lie of the land and there was nothing to do but take the lead ourselves.

I should say here that when we first arrived at the head of the gorge after crossing the snowfield, we had met a couple of British officers returning after an unsuccessful attempt to get through. They told us that the place was swarming with enemy and that any attempt under the present circumstances was quite doomed to failure and when they saw the numbers in our column they nearly threw a fit on the spot. I felt afterwards that for senior officers, they were both Lieut-Colonels, their attempt must have been singularly half-hearted and that their advice, well-meaning though it was, might have deterred us from our own try. Incidentally, they got through successfully the night after we saw them.

As we passed the last of the Italians we saw on the ground some telephone cables and passed back word for all to avoid disturbing them at all costs. We were then among a small wood and while we discussed what was to be the next move we heard guns firing only a hundred yards or so from us and I surmised that the cable we had seen was to the observer who was probably on the hill to our left and if the cable were cut, as some suggested, there would immediately be a party sent out to find the break, and us.

We walked slowly and silently through the trees and soon came to the end of the wood from where an excellent view could be had of the front. Again we halted to confer. My view was that two or three had better go forward to the edge of the hill and try to see where the Allied line lay before dusk fell as it was already beginning to get dull. Archie, Nigel with his glasses, Bill and I went forward after sending the rest of the party back under cover of the wood with strict orders to observe silence explaining that our success depended on not arousing the suspicions of the Germans now so close to us.

Creeping to the edge of the hill, we lay down and made a thorough examination of the ground in front with the aid of Nigel's field glasses though none of us had the vaguest idea of where the Germans positions ended or where the Allied line began. Below, at the foot of the mountain, ran the Sangro river across our front. On the right lay the tiny village of Alfedena with flames licking round the houses. Further to our right we

could just make out some four or five miles away the town of Castel di Sangro also fired by the Germans and burning merrily. Immediately below and only a hundred yards away were the snouts of two German guns projecting from their pits dug into the side of the hill. Beyond the river the country was undulating, dark green with a white ribbon of a road running diagonally across from Castel di Sangro into the distance and every now and then there would be the grey burst of an Allied shell in the middle distance but still no indication of the demarcation between friend and foe. Suddenly we were shaken by the thump of firing from the guns beneath our feet and, as an artillery officer, from sheer force of habit, I grabbed the glasses to spot the fall of shot.

The first round I missed but heard the dull clang of its detonation to the left front and when they fired again I spotted the white puff of the shell burst on the crest of a range of hills which ran along the horizon to our left some six or seven miles away. Thereafter it was easy for each round of the dozen or so fired was on that crest but each a little to the right of its predecessor, telling me all that I wanted to know. I must have given a little grunt of satisfaction for Archie asked me whether I had seen anything of interest to which I replied that the shelling was obviously the Germans ranging on the forward line of Allied troops and if we could reach those hills I was confident that we would be safe.

Then I called the senior members of each of the Allied parties and the eldest and most sensible-looking of the Italians in order to make a plan. When they came up their first question was whether we had been able to see anything and if I knew where the enemy were. We again all lay on our faces on the grass and the plan was formulated.

I said that there were German artillery between us and the river and there might be German infantry on the other bank but added that the line of hills in the distance was almost certainly in Allied hands. Then came the question of what to do. I said that each party of not more than six should form up on the crest where we were then lying but with a lateral distance of at least two hundred yards between each and then when it was quite dark each group should set forth down the hill towards the river and be quite independent. The Italians I told to form up and go left along the hillside for at least two thousand metres, through a tree-clad height and then down to the river, at the same time enjoining on them absolute silence. No one was to leave the shelter of the wood till it was quite dark and then wishing them all good luck, we split up to our various groups.

My little party assembled and sat down on the grass to wait for darkness;

it consisted of Bill and two American airmen, Archie, Nigel and myself. We discussed our plan of march between ourselves, deciding to take it in turns to lead when we started. Bill and the Americans, being airmen, had little idea of what to do but it was impressed on them that, once we were on the way, it was imperative to keep utter silence. Darkness fell quickly in a few minutes and I began to be concerned as to how we were going to be able to keep our line of march directed on the hills but found that the burning houses on each flank would be a help. Stars there were none as the sky was overcast with heavy clouds.

The very last section of our journey was about to commence and I, for one, rose to my feet with a thrill in my heart. The last thing to do before setting off was to decide the first leader and after some argument, I found myself in this somewhat unenviable position on the apparent grounds that I knew more than the others. I must however admit that in one way I was glad for I would only have myself to blame if the party walked into the enemy but it was a heavy responsibility to bear at this juncture.

It was dark when I gave the word to move in single file down the hill. Slowly step by step we descended directing our way between the two gun emplacements which I had seen from the top of the hill. All was silent as the grave until, suddenly, I heard a telephone bell ring almost beneath my feet. I froze in my tracks and whispered to Archie who was following to pass the word back to turn round and go up the hill. Silently we retraced our steps up fifty feet then halted to make a new plan.

I realised immediately that we had walked almost on top of the enemy command post but by great good fortune we had not been heard. Through the quiet of the night there then came to us the sound of distant voices and the crash of people making their way through the woods away to our left, it was the Italians observing their rule of silence like a herd of elephants in the jungle. In another moment we heard a German voice roar out "ALT" and again "ALT" followed a few seconds later by a burst of machine-gun fire and then another. We all wondered what was happening to those poor devils with their suitcases and bags but realised that for us it was the best thing that could have happened for it drew off the Germans to that side.

Calling my group to their feet, we set off again down the hillside but this time we went further to our right before going down in order to be clear of the guns. As before we slowly and carefully picked our way over the turf until we came to a stone wall over which we climbed successfully in silence. We crept along the line of the wall which turned down the hill on and on, down and down. Still no sign of a German anywhere except for the shouting and

shooting on our left some hundreds of yards away. Then the rain began to fall, at first lightly but heavily in a few minutes, another great aid to our adventure.

Over another wall and through some brambles and we found ourselves on a railway line by a viaduct which had been blown up. The river was close now, just the other side of a road and I could see the foaming water gleaming softly through the darkness but I wondered where we were going to find the forward German Infantry, their barbed wire and mines. It was heart-stopping work, creeping silently forward through the midst of our enemies.

Thinking it dangerous to clamber over the railway line, I led my party down a small freshet which ran beneath the viaduct over the road and across a bushy common to the edge of the Sangro river. We were dismayed when we saw it, some thirty yards wide with the water boiling and foaming between its banks. Had there been a bridge we could not possibly have used it so there was no alternative but to wade or swim to the other side. One of the party found a long pole and volunteered to lead us over; then we formed a human chain by linking hands and in we went. It was icy cold and the force of the current tore at our feet and bodies trying to wrench us off our balance and plunge us all into the stream but we held firm and foot by foot forced our way slowly to the other side where we emerged dripping and out of breath, the water having been to the level of our waists.

The river bank was no place to dally so once more I set off across the fields. It was more than difficult to keep in the right direction and I asked the others quietly if any by chance had a compass whereupon one of the Americans produced a stud with a tiny compass in the end of it, a child's toy almost but on this occasion worth its weight in gold, having been issued to him as "escape apparatus" some time previously. We were still in the dark both figuratively and literally but of a sudden a tremendous battle began over on our right near Isernia by the light from which I caught a glimpse of the hills ahead and was able to take a rapid compass bearing.

Before going on I said that I would stop every two or three minutes when all would strain their ears for any sound there might be even though we were to be wide awake whilst moving as well. Forward we went, the immediate silence only broken by the squelch of boots in the soft grass; over one meadow, then another, then stop to listen but there was not a sound. Behind on our right glowed the burning village of Alfedena and on the left we could see the flames licking through the houses of Castel di Sangro and far away to the right was the battle near Isernia. It was an amazing sight from where

we were, the glow of shell bursts with the coloured tracer bouncing up and down the mountainside but all that fell round us was the drenching rain, steadily and remorselessly whilst overhead there whistled the occasional shell from British guns on their way to burst against the mountains we had left.

I came to a road and a damaged railway beside it and the village burial ground of Alfedena but thankfully still no sign of a German. Small streams and another road were crossed then we took to the fields again moving as fast as caution and the need for silence would permit and still our occasional stops revealed no sounds in the night. We had been going for five hours or more when we came to a ruined and deserted farm; having made certain that it was occupied by neither side the six of us sat down in the shelter of a shed and ate what we had left of our food, consisting of bread and jam.

It was a welcome halt for we had been marching for about eighteen hours almost continuously. The food did us good and we talked over what had occurred, giving us a certain feeling of achievement. I was coming to the belief that we were probably through the main German defences, if any such existed as we were then some five miles beyond the guns and from experience, I knew that field artillery was usually closer than that to its infantry. But there was still the danger of running into patrols both enemy or our own who would fire at anything moving through the night if we bumped into them. But we must be on the move again for our clothes were sodden from the rain and the river and would soon have made us chilled through, so having eaten the last of the food we got to our feet once more.

Over deserted stubble, through brambles and hedges we came to the road we had seen from the top of the hill running from Castel di Sangro to the south. Beyond this we could see a wide plain with many dark objects scattered about which later turned out to be wandering cattle and in the middle of this plain we came upon a small stream, too wide to jump, so it meant another wade though it mattered not to our boots already utterly soaked from the Sangro crossing.

In half an hour we were at the other side of the plain at the foot of the range of hills on which the German guns had been firing earlier in the evening. I looked about for a path leading upwards but found none, only a gap in the brush which clothed the slopes of the hills so started the climb from there. The rain now began to fall more heavily still, after having eased off somewhat for the last couple of hours and to make matters worse, when we were all in the middle of a deep thicket, Bill called out that his shoes had completely collapsed and dropped literally to pieces. All we could do to

help was give him the three pairs of spare socks I had been carrying, all of which he put on in place of shoes. It was terrible going as we fought our way upwards; it was impossible to move silently through the dense undergrowth as we slipped and fell, scrambled and thrust our way forward yard by yard, pulling and pushing Bill alternately when his stockinged feet slid on the greasy ground.

The rain poured from the black sky and the battle, now behind us, raged with the tracer still bouncing on the hillsides for all the world like a great neon sign gone mad and the six of us tired soaked and hungry men dragged our limbs up the hill to safety. After two hours of struggle the brush opened out and fell behind us and we found ourselves in open country again near the crest of the ridge but with the vanquishing of one difficulty, another came upon us as the temperature rapidly dropped many degrees and we all shivered violently after the exertions of the climb. On and on till the ground before us levelled out and the first grey light of dawn crept up over the hills in front of us.

In a little while we came to a rough track running between low hedges on which I noticed cables resting. Eagerly we took them in our hands to see whether they were German and came to the conclusion both from the way they were laid and the type that they could only be British - a tremendous moment in a day of great events. Their general direction was away from the ridge which we had just surmounted so I decided to follow them but after a mile we lost them in broken country in the half light of dawn. Gradually the light strengthened to shew us that we were once more on high ground, broken and criss-crossed by gullies and hummocks but quite bare of any sign of life or habitation as we wearily dragged our tortured feet along. All were tired beyond words for we had now been going steadily for twenty four hours over some of the worst country in Italy though my long walk had toughened me for this final effort.

For another hour we all struggled slowly onwards until with the red flush of the true dawn rising over the mountains, we came to the edge of our plateau, and met another track leading down into the dark valley below. The dark valley slept for there was no sign of life yet and we almost wondered whether we had penetrated to the lost world for there was nothing moving and no sound anywhere, even the battle behind us was silent at last. We halted for a rest but when I suggested that we go on, four of the party said they had had enough and would wait till they were picked up by Allied troops so I went on with one of the American airmen down the track.

We trudged on like automatons but fortunately the way now was all down

hill, the track improving all the while and the light gradually flooding over the valley. Another hour during which we hardly exchanged a word then we came round a bend to meet an old peasant driving two cows to pasture and saw a small village a mile or so further on down the track. When we came up to the old man I bade him good morning and tried my usual opening gambit of "Are there Germans in the village?". And now for the greatest moment of the past three months when he replied, "No, there are no Germans; the British are here".

The American and I looked at each other silently. We were through. Our efforts had been crowned with success, our trials and tribulations had not been in vain and as these and other thoughts flashed through our heads we began to run, in our excited haste to speak with our own people again, the fatigue for the moment being banished by the thrill of success. Our wearied and long-suffering feet seemed to have wings as we clattered down over the cobble stones into the village.

At the first house on the left as we entered, we saw some American troops washing and cooking in the garden. We stopped long enough to ask where the local headquarters were and collect some cigarettes then we were away again. In the centre of the village we enquired of an Italian where the commander was and he pointed out a house further down the street. As we hammered on the door I asked my friend to do the talking as these were his own folk and this he agreed to do.

The door opened and a head with a sleepy pair of eyes looked out. "We are escaped prisoners" my friend said. "Oh yeah" said the head, glancing at our battered clothes and slammed the door again. Catching each other's eyes, we laughed and knocked again. The next time the door opened my friend said "Say, I'm an American officer and my friend here is English". This time the head smiled and said "Sorry, I took you for Ities; come right on in".

Inside the house was all stir and bustle with men shaving, dressing and preparing breakfast. Our welcome was as warm as the first attempt had been frigid and in a moment we were sat down at a table with mugs of steaming coffee and piled plates before us which we steadily consumed all the while answering a thousand questions from the eager GIs. Soon there was a shout of "Whats a-goin on in here?" and a Major entered the room. He was told that we were a couple of escapees and as we had nearly finished our meal, he asked us into his office and gave us another hearty welcome and congratulations. Over the remains of our coffee and a cigarette, we answered the many questions he put about our route and the German troops through whose lines we had come. On his map we showed him the lie of the land.

He then explained that his was a battalion of airborne troops operating as infantry on the left of the Eighth Army and forming the link with the American Fifth Army and then asked me whether I wished to be repatriated through the Eighth or Fifth to which I replied the former as I thought my own regiment might be with them. When we had showed him the route by which we had come through he enquired whether we had met up with the patrol which the battalion had sent out the night before as we had apparently come right across their line and when I said that we had neither seen nor heard anything or anyone, he said "Gee, I'll make it plenty hot for those boys when they get in" and he was not pacified any the more when I added the information that some thirty others had been trying to get through as well as my party.

He then phoned through to British Divisional H.Q. to report our arrival and request a car and then told me that there was a British officer in the village, on a job of setting up a headquarters so I went off to see him. It was only a short step up the street to his house and I found a R.E. Captain who was making arrangements for the arrival of his Brigade H.Q. and who pressed on me another breakfast while he had his.

CHAPTER 17.

AFTERMATH.

In the quieter atmosphere of the Sapper's billet I was able to bring my brain to bear so as to enable him to take down full notes while the incidents were still fresh in my memory. In particular I gave him details as accurate as possible of the position of the 88 mm German guns which we had walked past during the night; he told me that these guns had been causing some trouble and the local gunners would be grateful for the figures I had given them. In fact, he was so keen to press on with the job that he telephoned the R.A. H.Q. with the information at once and some days later when I ran into two other R.A. friends of mine from Fontanellato who had followed the same route, I found that they had sat on the hillside where I had done and had watched our own guns shelling the Germans. The corrections they gave when they came through the lines that night enabled our artillery to put the Germans just where they wanted to get them.

Archie and Nigel drifted in later, making very heavy weather of the last few yards through the village after they had been helped by the Americans and by the middle of the morning, we got news that a Scout car had arrived to take us back to Divisional H.Q. Just before we departed Bill arrived, footsore but rebooted and the four of us clambered into and on top of the small armoured vehicle with our "escort" - a corporal. It was a magnificent feeling to be again on a car but this time going where one wished and to sit there, dressed in our rags but feeling like a million dollars.

Before we began our journey proper, our escort had a call to make at Brigade H.Q., another village a mile along the road to which we duly went and the driver parked his car in the middle of the square while the corporal dived into one of the houses nearby. Archie, Nigel and I were sitting peacefully on the edge of the car's turret smoking and wishing the world no harm at all when, out of the corner of our eyes, we noticed a gorgeous object detach itself from a Staff car across the square. As it came towards us we realised it was an officer, R.A.S.C., in beautifully pressed breeches and jacket with Sam Browne and field boots with a gloss on them that would not have been out of place at the Royal Tournament. All he lacked to complete the picture was a sword at his side.

Over the cobbles, between the lorries and over the pools of muck and water strode this delectable creature in the direction of our scout car and standing by the driver's compartment, addressed that worthy in a high-pitched but fierce voice.

I say", he piped, "dont you know the regulations about carrying civilians

in army transport, DrivAll?", looking at us as though we were something the cat had brought in. The driver smiled and looked up at us quizzically; there was a moment of silence while both parties eyed each other, then I said "Good morning, but you need not worry about the driver breaking regulations, we are officers, escaped prisoners of war and the clothes are not our own choosing." Without a single word the elegant gentleman turned on his elegant heels and strode away back over the cobbles with the sniggers of several soldiers ringing in his ears; it was definitely one of the better moments.

We were soon on our way to Divisional H.Q. though it was quite chilly perched on top of the turret in the weak winter sunshine. It was an eye-opening revelation to motor through the Allied lines and see the abundance of war material of all kinds compared with the extreme scarcity on the German side. It was also very noticeable that our own troops were quite untroubled by enemy air activity which, we found out was very slight indeed and the guns, tanks and lorries were drawn up by the roadside in almost serried array. By lunch we were at Cantalupo, the home of the melon, and the site of Divisional H.Q. where we were given a short interview by the Intelligence Staff and then treated to an excellent lunch. By this time we had met up with some others of our night's party and previous escapees and were then put in lorries for the run to Campobasso, Corps H.Q.

En route we made a rapid stop for a bath and delousing of our clothes though by some luck I had not been afflicted with those creatures, then at Campobasso we arrived somewhat late for a meal though the best that could be, was done and we retired to sleep on a concrete floor, my first rest for over thirty hours, but I cannot say that I would not have preferred to have slept on hay or straw in a warm barn! The next day we were reclothed, fed, interviewed again by the I-Staff and passed back down the line to Lucera on the way to Foggia where we received a great reception.

Bari, Taranto and Bizerta were the next stages; from there to Algiers by rail, a musical comedy journey and air to Prestwick via Marrakech were the last stages. My front door opened to receive me at 7.15 p.m. on the 23rd December 1943.