

# THE SKIN

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CURZIO MALAPARTE

Translated from the Italian *La Pelle*  
by  
David Moore

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~~In affectionate memory of Colonel Henry E. Cumming, of the University of Virginia, and all the good, brave and honourable American soldiers who were my comrades-in-arms from 1943-1945, and who died in vain in the cause of European freedom.~~



## CHAPTER I - THE PLAGUE

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NAPLES was in the throes of the "plague." Every afternoon at five o'clock, after half an hour with the punch-ball and a hot shower in the gymnasium of the P.B.S.—Peninsular Base Section—Colonel Jack Hamilton and I would walk down in the direction of San Ferdinando, elbowing our way through the unruly mob which thronged Via Toledo from dawn until curfew-time.

We were clean, tidy and well fed, Jack and I, as we made our way through the midst of the dreadful Neapolitan mob—squalid, dirty, starving, ragged, jostled and insulted in all the languages and dialects of the world by troops of soldiers belonging to the Armies of Liberation, which were drawn from all the races of the earth. The distinction of being the first among all the peoples of Europe to be liberated had fallen to the people of Naples; and in celebration of the winning of so well-deserved a prize many poor beloved Neapolitans, after three years of hunger, epidemics and savage air attacks, had accepted gracefully and patriotically the longed-for and coveted honour of playing the part of a conquered people, of singing, clapping, jumping for joy amid the ruins of their houses, unfurling foreign flags which until the day before had been the emblems of their foes, and throwing flowers from the windows on to the heads of the conquerors.

But in spite of the universal and genuine enthusiasm there was not a single man or woman in the whole of Naples who was conscious of having been defeated. I cannot say how this strange feeling had arisen in the people's breasts. It was an undoubted fact that Italy, and hence also Naples, had lost the war. It is certainly much harder to lose a war than to win it. While everyone is good at winning a war, not all are capable of losing one. But the loss of a war does not in itself entitle a people to regard itself as conquered. In their ancient wisdom, enriched by the doleful experience of many hundreds of years, and in their sincere modesty, my poor beloved Neapolitans did not presume to regard themselves as conquered people. In this they undoubtedly revealed a grave lack of tact. But could the Allies claim to liberate peoples and at the same time compel them to regard themselves as conquered? They must be either free or conquered. It would be unjust to blame the people of Naples if they regarded themselves as neither free nor conquered.

As I walked beside Colonel Hamilton I felt incredibly ridiculous in my British uniform. The uniforms of the Italian Corps of Liberation were old British khaki uniforms, handed over by the British Command to Marshal Badoglio and—perhaps in an attempt to hide the bloodstains and bullet holes—dyed dark green, the colour of a lizard. They were, as a matter of fact, uniforms taken from the British soldiers who had fallen at El Alamein and Tobruk. In my tunic three holes made by machine-gun bullets were visible. My vest, shirt and pants were stained with blood. Even my shoes had been taken from the body of a British soldier. The first time I had put them on I had felt something pricking the sole of my foot. I had thought at first that a tiny bone belonging to the dead man had remained stuck in the shoe. It was a nail. It would have been better, perhaps, if it really had been a bone from the dead man: it would have been much easier for me to remove it. It took me half an hour to find a pair of pliers and remove the nail. There was no gainsaying it: that stupid war had certainly ended well for us. It certainly could not have ended better. Our *amour propre* as defeated soldiers was undamaged. Now we were fighting at the side of the Allies, trying to help them win their war after we had lost our own. Hence it was natural that we should be wearing the uniforms of the Allied soldiers whom we had killed.

When I at last succeeded in removing the nail and putting on my shoe I found that the company which I was to assume command had been assembled for some time past on the barrack-square. The barracks consisted of an ancient monastery, which had been reduced by time and the air bombardments to a state of ruin. It was situated in the vicinity of La Torretta, behind Mergellina. The "square" was a cloistered courtyard, bounded on three sides by a portico, which rested on slender

columns of grey tufa, and on the fourth by a high yellow wall, dotted with specks of green mould and great slabs of marble, on which were carved long lists of names, surmounted by great black crosses. During some cholera epidemic of centuries before the monastery had been used as a hospital, and the names referred to those who had died of the disease. On the wall was written in large black letters *Requiescant in pace*.

Colonel Palese had been anxious to introduce me to my soldiers himself in one of those simple ceremonies of which old military men are so fond. He was a tall, thin man, with completely white hair. He clasped my hand in silence and smiled, sighing dolefully as he did so. The soldiers were nearly all very young. They had fought well against the Allies in Africa and Sicily, and for this reason the Allies had chosen them to form the first cadre of the Italian Corps of Liberation. Lined up before us in the middle of the courtyard, they eyed me with a fixed stare. They too were wearing uniforms taken from British soldiers who had fallen at El Alamein and Tobruk, and their shoes were dead men's shoes. Their faces were pale and emaciated; their eyes, which were white and steady, consisted of a moist, opaque substance. They seemed to gaze at me without blinking.

Colonel Palese nodded his head, and the sergeant shouted: "Company—'shun." The soldiers riveted their gaze upon me; it was sorrowful and intense, like the gaze of a dead cat. Their limbs became rigid and they sprang to attention. The hands that grasped their rifles were white and bloodless. The flabby skin hung from the tips of their fingers like a glove that is too big.

Colonel Palese began to speak, "Here is your new commanding officer," he said, and while he spoke I looked at those Italian soldiers with their uniforms that had been taken from British corpses, their bloodless hands, their pale lips and white eyes. Here and there on their chests, stomachs and legs were black spots of blood. Suddenly I realized to my horror that these soldiers were dead. They gave out a faint odour of musty cloth, rotten leather, and flesh that had been dried up by the sun. I looked at Colonel Palese, and he was dead too. The voice that proceeded from his lips was watery, cold, and glutinous, like the horrible gurgling that issues from a dead man's mouth if you rest your hand on his stomach.

"Tell them to stand at ease," said Colonel Palese to the sergeant when he had ended his brief address. "Company stand at—ease!" cried the sergeant. The soldiers flopped down on to their left heels in limp and weary attitudes and stared at me fixedly, with a softer, more distant look. "And now," said Colonel Palese, "your new commanding officer will say a few words to you." I opened my mouth and a horrible gurgling sound came out; my words were muffled, thick, flaccid, I said: "We are the volunteers of Freedom, the soldiers of the new Italy. It is our duty to fight the Germans, to drive them out of our homeland, to throw them back beyond our frontiers. The eyes of all Italians are fixed upon us. It is our duty once more to hoist the flag that has fallen in the mire, to set an example to all in the midst of so much shame, to show ourselves worthy of the present hour, of the task that our country entrusts to us." When I had finished speaking Colonel Palese said to the soldiers: "Now one of you will repeat what your commanding officer has said. I want to be sure you understand. You!" he said, pointing to a soldier. "Repeat what your commanding officer said."

The soldier looked at me; he was pale, he had the thin, bloodless lips of a dead man. Slowly, in a dreadful gurgling voice, he said: "It is our duty to show ourselves worthy of the shame of Italy."

Colonel Palese came up close to me. "They understand," he said in a low voice, and moved silently away. Under his left armpit was a black spot of blood which gradually spread over the material of his uniform. I watched that black spot of blood as it gradually spread, my eyes followed the old Italian colonel, with his uniform that had belonged to an Englishman now dead, I watched him slowly moving away and heard the squeaking of his shoes, the shoes of a dead British soldier, and the name of Italy stank in my nostrils like a piece of rotten meat.

"This bastard people!" said Colonel Hamilton between his teeth forcing his way through the crowd.

"Why do you say that, Jack?"

Having reached the top of the Augusteo we used to turn off each day into Via Santa Brigida, where the crowd was thinner, and pause a moment to regain our breath.

"This bastard people," said Jack, straightening his uniform, which had been rumpled by the terrible pressure of the crowd.

"Don't say that, Jack."

"Why not. This bastard, dirty people."

"Oh, Jack! I am a bastard and a dirty Italian too. But I am proud of being a dirty Italian. It isn't our fault if we weren't born in America. I am sure we should be a bastard, dirty people even if we had been born in America. Don't you think so, Jack?"

"Don't worry, Malaparte," said Jack. "Don't take it to heart. Life is wonderful."

"Yes, life is a splendid thing, Jack, I know. But don't say that."

"Sorry," said Jack, patting me on the shoulder. "I didn't mean to offend you. It's a figure of speech. I like Italians. I like this bastard, dirty, wonderful people."

"I know, Jack—I know you like this poor, unhappy, wonderful people. No people on earth has ever endured as much as the people of Naples. They have endured hunger and slavery for two thousand years, and they don't complain. They revile no one, they hate no one—not even their own misery. Christ was a Neapolitan."

"Don't talk nonsense," said Jack.

"It isn't nonsense. Christ was a Neapolitan."

"What's the matter with you today, Malaparte?" said Jack, looking at me with his fine eyes.

"Nothing. What do you suppose is the matter with me?"

"You're in a black mood," said Jack.

"Why should I be in a bad mood?"

"I know you, Malaparte. You're in a black mood today."

"I am sad about Cassino, Jack."

"To hell with Cassino."

"I am sad, truly sad, about what is happening at Cassino."

"To hell with you," said Jack.

"It really is a shame that you're bringing such misery to Cassino."

"Shut up, Malaparte."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to offend you, Jack. I like Americans. I like the pure, the clean, the wonderful American people."

"I know, Malaparte. I know you like Americans. But take it easy, Malaparte. Life is wonderful."

"To hell with Cassino, Jack."

"Oh, yes. To hell with Naples, Malaparte."

There was a strange smell in the air. It was not the smell that comes down at eventide from the alleys of Toledo and from the Piazza delle Carrette and Santa Teresella degli Spagnoli. It was not the smell from the fried-fish shops, taverns and urinals nestling in the dark and fetid alleys of the *Quartieri* that stretch from Via Toledo up towards San Martino. It was not that nauseating, stuffy, glutinous smell, composed of a thousand effuvia, a thousand noisome exhalations—*mille délicats puanteurs*, as Jack put it—which at certain times of day pervades the city and emanates from the withered flowers that lie in heaps at the feet of the Madonnas in the chapels at the corners of the alleys. It was not the smell of the sirocco, which smacks of bad fish and of the cheese that is made from sheep's milk. It was not even that smell of cooked meat which towards evening spreads over Naples from the brothels—that smell in which Jean-Paul Sartre, walking one day along Via Toledo, detected the *parent*



*immonde de l'amour et de la nourriture*. No, it was not that smell of cooked meat which broods over Naples towards sunset, when *la chair des femmes a fait bouillie sous la crasse*. It was an extraordinarily pure, delicate smell, dry, light, unsubstantial—the smell of brine, the salt tang of the night air, the smell of an ancient forest from the trees of which paper is made.

Parties of dishevelled, painted women, followed by crowds of negro soldiers with pale hands, were parading up and down Via Toledo, cleaving the air above the thronged streets with shrill cries of "Hi, Joe! Hi, Joe!" At the entrances to the alleys loitered the public hairdressers, the *capere*. They formed long lines, and each stood behind a seat. On the seat, their eyes closed and their heads lolling against the backs or sunk upon their breasts, sat athletic negroes with small round skulls and yellow shoes that shone like the feet of the gilded statues of the Angels in the church of Santa Chiara. Yelling and calling to one another with strange guttural cries, singing, or arguing at the top of their voices with their neighbours, who looked down from the windows and balconies as though from boxes at the theatre, the *capere* sank their combs into the negroes' curly, woolly hair, drew them towards them with both hands, spat on the teeth to reduce the friction, poured rivers of brilliantine into the palms of their hands, and rubbed and smoothed the patients' wild locks like *masseuses*.

Bands of ragged boys knelt before their little wooden boxes, which were plastered with flakes of mother of pearl, sea-shells and fragments of mirrors, and beat the lids with the backs of their brushes crying "Shoeshine! Shoeshine!" Meanwhile, with bony, eager hands, they grabbed the negro soldiers by the edge of the trousers as they went past, swaying their hips. Groups of Moroccan soldiers squatted along the walls, enveloped in their dark robes, their faces riddled with pock-marks, their yellow deep-set eyes shining from dark, wrinkled sockets, inhaling through quivering nostrils the dust and odour that permeated the dusty air.

Faded women, with livid faces and painted lips, their emaciated cheeks plastered with rouge—dreadful and piteous sight—loitered at the corners of the alleys, offering to the passers-by their sort of merchandise. This consisted of boys and girls of eight or ten, whom the soldiers—Moroccans, Indian Algerians, Madagascans—caressed with their fingers, slipping their hands between the buttons of their short trousers or lifting their dresses. "Two dollars the boys, three dollars the girls!" shouted the women.

"Tell me frankly—would you like a little girl at three dollars?" I said to Jack.

"Shut up, Malaparte."

"After all, it's not much, three dollars for a little girl. Two pounds of lamb cost far more. I'm sure a little girl costs more in London or New York than here— isn't that so, Jack?"

"Tu me dégoutes," said Jack.

"Three dollars is barely three hundred lire. How much can a little girl of eight or ten weigh? Fifteen pounds? Remember that on the black market two pounds of lamb cost five hundred and fifty lire, in other words five dollars and fifty cents."

"Shut up!" cried Jack.

During the last few days the prices of girls and boys had dropped, and they were still falling. Whereas the prices of sugar, oil, flour, meat and bread had risen and were still on the increase, the price of human flesh was slumping from day to day. A girl between twenty and twenty-five years of age, who a week before was worth up to ten dollars, was now worth barely four dollars, bones included. This fall in the price of human flesh on the Neapolitan market may have been due to the fact that women were flocking to Naples from all parts of Southern Italy. During recent weeks the wholesalers had thrown on to the market a large consignment of Sicilian women. It was not all fresh meat, but the speculators knew that negro soldiers have refined tastes, and prefer meat not to be too fresh. Yet Sicilian meat was not in great demand, and even the negroes refused it in the end: negroes don't like white women to be too dark. Every day there arrived in Naples, on carts drawn by wretched

little donkeys or in Allied vehicles, but mostly on foot, parties of sturdily-built, robust girls, nearly all of them peasants, attracted by the mirage of gold. They came from the Calabrias, the Apulias, the Basilicata and Molise. And so the price of human flesh on the Neopolitan market had been crashing and it was feared that this might have a serious effect on the whole economy of the city. (Nothing of the kind had ever been seen in Naples before. It was certainly a disgrace, and the vast majority of the good people of Naples blushed with shame because of it. But why did it not bring a blush to the cheeks of the Allied authorities, who were the masters of Naples?) In compensation, negroes' flesh had risen in price, and this, luckily, was helping to re-establish a certain equilibrium on the market.

"What does negroes' flesh cost today?" I asked Jack.

"Shut up," he answered.

"Is it true that the flesh of a black American costs more than that of a white American?"

"Tu m'agaces," answered Jack.

I certainly had no intention of offending him, nor of poking fun at him, nor even of being disrespectful to the American Army—the loveliest, the kindest, the most respectable Army in the world. What did it matter to me if the flesh of a black American cost more than that of a white American? I like Americans, whatever the colour of their skin, and I proved it a hundred times during the war. White or black, their souls are pure, much purer than ours. I like the Americans because they are good and sincere Christians; because they believe that Christ is always on the side of those who are in the right; because they believe that it is a sin to be in the wrong, that it is immoral to be in the wrong; because they believe that they alone are honourable men, and that all the nations of Europe are more or less dishonest; because they believe that a conquered nation is a nation of criminals, that defeat is a moral stigma, an expression of divine justice.

I like Americans for these reasons, and for many others that I have not mentioned. In that terrible autumn of 1943, which brought so much humiliation and grief to my fellow-countrymen, the Americans' humanity and generosity, the pure and honest simplicity of their ideas and sentiments, and the genuineness of their behaviour, instilled in me the illusion that men hate evil, the hope that humanity would mend its ways, and the conviction that only goodness—the goodness and innocence of those splendid boys from across the Atlantic, who had landed in Europe to punish the wicked and reward the good—could redeem nations and individuals from their sins.

But of all my American friends the dearest was Staff Colonel Jack Hamilton. Jack was a man of thirty-eight—tall, thin, pale and elegant, with gentlemanly, almost European manners. On first acquaintance, perhaps, he seemed more European than American, but this was not the reason why I loved him: and I loved him like a brother. For gradually, as I got to know him intimately, he showed himself to be intensely and indisputably American. He had been born in South Carolina ("My nurse he used to say, "*was une negresse par un demon secouée*"), but he was not merely what is known in America as a Southerner. Intellectually he was a man of culture and refinement, and at the same time there was about him an almost childlike simplicity and innocence. What I mean is that he was an American in the noblest sense of the word—one of the most admirable men I have ever met. He was a "Christian gentleman". How hard it is for me to express what I mean by the term "Christian gentleman"! All who know and love the Americans will understand what I mean when I say that the American nation is a Christian nation, and that Jack was a Christian gentleman.

Educated at Woodberry Forest School and at Virginia University, Jack had devoted himself with equal enthusiasm to Latin, Greek and sport, putting himself with equal confidence in the hands of Horace, Virgil, Simonides and Xenophon and in those of the *masseurs* of the University gymnasium. In 1928 he had been a sprinter in the American Olympic Track Team at Amsterdam, and he was prouder of his Olympic victories than of his academic honours. After 1929 he had spent some years in Paris as a representative of the United Press, and he was proud of his well-nigh perfect French.

learned French from the classics," he used to say. "My French tutors were La Fontaine and Madam Bonnet, the caretaker of the house in which I lived in rue Vaugirard. Tu ne trouves pas que je parle comme les animaux de La Fontaine? It was he who taught me *qu'un chien peut bien regarder un évêque*."

"And you came to Europe," I would say to him, "to learn that? *Un chien peut bien regarder un évêque* in America as well."

"Oh non," Jack would reply, "en Amérique ce sont les évêques qui peuvent regarder les chiens."

Jack was also well acquainted with what he called *la banlieue de Paris*, in other words Europe. He had journeyed through Switzerland, Belgium, Germany and Sweden in the same spirit of humanism and with the same thirst for knowledge as the English undergraduates who, before Dr. Arnold's reform, used to journey across Europe during their summer Grand Tour. After his travels Jack had returned to America with the manuscripts of an essay on the spirit of European civilization and of a thesis on Descartes, which had earned him an appointment as Professor of Literature in a great American university. But academic laurels do not flourish on an athlete's brow as Olympic laurels do, and Jack could not get over the fact that a muscular strain in the knee prevented him from running again in the international contests for the honour of the Stars and Stripes. In an attempt to forget his misfortune Jack would repair to the changing-room of the University gymnasium and read his adored Virgil or his beloved Xenophon, surrounded by that odour of rubber, soaking towels, soap and linoleum which is peculiarly associated with classical culture in the universities of the Anglo-Saxon countries.

One morning I came upon him unawares in the changing-room—deserted at that hour—of the Peninsular Base Section's gymnasium, deeply engrossed in Pindar. He looked at me and smiled, colouring slightly. He asked me if I liked Pindar's poetry, adding that the Pindaric odes written in honour of the athletes who had triumphed at Olympia do not convey any idea of the long, hard, and drudgery of training, that those divine verses resound with the yells of the crowd and the triumphal applause, not with the hoarse whistling and the rasping sound that comes from the mouths of athletes when they make their last terrible effort. "I know all about it," he said, "I know what the last twenty yards are. Pindar is not a modern poet. He is an English poet of the Victorian era."

Although he preferred Horace and Virgil to all other poets because of their serene melancholy, Greek poetry and ancient Greece filled him with a sense of gratitude—not the gratitude of a scholar but that of a son. He knew by heart whole books of the Iliad, and tears would come into his eyes when he declaimed, in Greek, the hexameters on the "funeral Games in honour of Patroclus." One day, as we sat on the bank of the Volturno, near the Bailey bridge at Capua, waiting for the sergeant guarding the bridge to give us the signal to cross, we discussed Winckelmann and the concept of beauty among the ancient Hellenes. I remember Jack's telling me that the gloomy, funereal, mysterious imagery of ancient Greece, so raw and barbaric, or, as he put it, Gothic, appealed to him less than the joyfully harmonious, clear imagery of Hellenistic Greece, which was so young, vivacious and modern, and which he described as a French Greece, a Greece of the eighteenth century. And when I asked him what, in his opinion, was the American Greece, he replied with a laugh: "The Greece of Xenophon," and, still laughing, began to paint a remarkable and witty picture of Xenophon—"a Virginia gentleman"—which was a disguised satire, in the style of Dr. Johnson, of certain Hellenists of the Boston school.

Jack had an indulgent and mischievous contempt for the Hellenists of Boston. One morning I found him sitting under a tree, with a book on his knees, near a heavy battery facing Cassino. It was during the sad days of the Battle of Cassino. It was raining—for a fortnight it had been doing nothing but rain. Columns of lorries laden with American soldiers, sewn up in white sheets of coarse linen cloth, were going down in the direction of the little military cemeteries which were to be seen here and there

beside the Via Appia and the Via Casilina. To keep the rain off the pages of his book—an eighteenth century anthology of Greek poetry with a soft leather binding and gilt edges, presented to him by the worthy Gaspare Casella, the famous antiquarian bookseller of Naples and a friend of Anatole France—Jack was sitting with his body bent forward, covering the precious book with his mackintosh.

I remember his saying to me with a laugh that in Boston Simonides was not considered a great poet. And he added that Emerson, in his funeral panegyric of Thoreau, declared that "his classic poem of *Smoke* suggests Simonides, but is better than any poem of Simonides." He laughed heartily. "Ah, cogens de Boston! Tu vois ça? Thoreau, in the opinion of Boston, is greater than Simonides!" he said, and the rain entered his mouth, mingling with his words and his laughter.

His favourite American poet was Edgar Allan Poe. But sometimes, when he had drunk a whisky more than usual, he would confuse Horace's verses with Poe's, and be deeply astonished to find Annabel Lee and Lydia in the same alcaic. Or he would confuse Madame de Sévigné's "talking leaf" with one of LaFontaine's talking animals.

"It wasn't an animal," I would say to him. "It was a leaf—a leaf from a tree."

And I would quote the relevant passage from the letter in which Madame de Sévigné wrote that she wished there was a talking leaf in the park of her castle, Les Rochers, in Brittany.

"Mais cela c'est absurde," Jack would say. "Une feuille qui parle! Un animal, ça se comprend, mais une feuille!"

"For the understanding of Europe," I would say to him, "Cartesian logic is useless. Europe is a mysterious place, full of inviolable secrets."

"Ah, Europe! What an extraordinary place it is!" Jack would exclaim. "I need Europe, to make me conscious of being an American."

But Jack was not one of those *Americians de Paris*—they are found on every page of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*—who round about 1925 used to frequent the Select in Montparnasse, who disdained Ford Maxon Ford's tea-parties and Sylvia Beach's bookshop, and who are said by Sinclair Lewis, alluding specifically to certain characters created by Eleanor Green, to have been like the intellectual fugitives who frequented the Rive Gauche roundabout 1925, or like T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound or Isadora Duncan—"iridescent flies caught in the black web of an ancient and amoral European culture." Nor was Jack one of those decadent transatlantic youths who formed the *Transition*<sup>[1]</sup> clique. No, Jack was neither a *déraciné* nor a decadent. He was an American in love with Europe.

He had for Europe a respect compounded of love and admiration. But in spite of his culture and his affectionate familiarity with our virtues and our faults his attitude to Europe, like that of nearly all true Americans, was conditioned by a subtle species of "inferiority complex", which manifested itself not, to be sure, in an inability to understand and forgive our misery and shame, but in a fear of understanding, a reluctance to understand which was due to a certain delicacy of feeling. In Jack this inferiority complex, this ingenuousness and wonderful delicacy of feeling, were perhaps more apparent than in many other Americans. Whenever, in a Neapolitan street, in a village near Capua or Caserta, or on the Cassino road, he happened to witness some distressing incident which typified our misery, our physical and moral humiliation, and our despair (the misery, humiliation and despair not only of Naples and Italy, but of all Europe), Jack would blush crimson.

Because of that way he had of blushing I loved Jack like a brother. Because of his wonderful delicacy of feeling, so profoundly and truly American, I was grateful to Jack, to all General Clark's G.I.s, and to all the men, women and children of America. (America—that luminous, remote horizon, that unattainable shore, that happy, forbidden country!) Sometimes, in an attempt to hide his delicacy of feeling, he would say, blushing crimson: "This bastard, dirty people." On such occasions I used to react to his wonderful sensitiveness with bitter and sarcastic words, accompanied by uneasy, malicious laughter, which I immediately regretted, and remembered with remorse all night long. F

would perhaps have preferred it if I had started to cry: my tears would certainly have seemed to him more natural than my sarcasm, less cruel than my bitterness. But I too had something to hide. We too, in this miserable Europe of ours, are afraid and ashamed of our delicacy of feeling.

It was not my fault, however, if the price of negroes' flesh was increasing every day. A dead negro cost nothing; he cost much less than a dead white man—even less than a live Italian! He cost pretty much the same as twenty Neapolitan children who had died of hunger. It was indeed strange that a dead negro should cost so little. A dead negro is very handsome. He is glossy, massive, immense, and when he is stretched out on the ground he occupies almost twice as much space as a dead white man. Even if a negro, when he was alive in America, was only a poor Harlem bootblack, or a navy who's job was to unload coal in the docks, or a fireman on the railways, in death he took up almost as much space as the huge, magnificent corpses of the Homeric heroes. At heart I was pleased to think that the corpse of a negro took up almost as much ground as the corpse of Achilles, Hector or Ajax would have done. And I could not resign myself to the idea that a dead negro should cost so little.

But a live negro cost a small fortune. Within the last few days the price of live negroes had risen in Naples from two hundred to a thousand dollars, and its tendency was to increase. It was only necessary to see the hungry expressions with which the poor people eyed a negro—a live negro—to appreciate that the price of live negroes was very high, and was still rising. The dream of all the poor people in Naples, especially the street arabs and the boys, was to be able to hire a "black", if only for a few hours. Hunting negro soldiers was the favourite sport of the boys. Naples, to them, was a vast equatorial forest, redolent with a warm, heavy odour of sweet fritters, where ecstatic negroes promenaded, swaying their hips, their eyes fixed upon the heavens. When a street arab managed to seize a negro by the sleeve of his tunic and drag him along behind him from bar to bar, from inn to inn, from brothel to brothel, all the windows, doorsteps and street corners in the maze of alleys that constitutes Toledo and Forcella would fill with eyes, hands and voices crying: "Sell me your black! I will give you twenty dollars! Thirty dollars! Fifty dollars!" This was what was called the "flying market". Fifty dollars was the maximum price that was paid for the hire of a negro for a day, that is for a few hours—the time needed to make him drunk, to strip him of everything he had on, from his cap to his shoes, and then, after nightfall, to abandon him naked on the pavement of an alley.

The negro suspects nothing. He is not conscious of being bought and resold every quarter of an hour, and he walks about innocently and happily, very proud of his shoes, which glitter as though made of gold, his smart uniform, his yellow gloves, his rings and gold teeth, his great white eyes, viscous and translucent like the eyes of an octopus. He walks along with a smile on his face, his head inclined on his shoulder and his eyes lost in contemplation of a green cloud drifting far away through the sea-blue sky, his sharp, dazzlingly white teeth seeming to cut like scissors the blue fringe of the roofs, the bare legs of the girls leaning against the railings of the balconies, the red carnations that protrude from the terra-cotta vases on the window sills. He walks like a somnambulist, savouring with delight all the smells, colours, tastes, sights and sounds that make life sweet: the smell of fritters, wine and fried fish, a pregnant woman sitting on her doorstep, a girl scratching her back, another girl looking for a flea in her bosom, the crying of a baby in its cradle, the laughter of a street arab, the flashing of the sunlight on a window-pane, the music of a gramophone, the flames of the papier maché Purgatories in which the damned burn at the feet of the Madonnas in the chapels at the corners of the alleys, a boy who, with knife-like teeth, snow-white and dazzling, produces from a curved slice of melon, as from a mouth-organ, a half-moon of green and red sounds that sparkle against the grey sky of a wall, a girl combing her hair at a window, singing *Ohi Mari* and gazing at her image reflected in the sky as in a mirror.

The negro does not notice that the boy who holds his hand and strokes his wrist, talking to him softly and looking up at him with mild eyes, from time to time changes his identity. (When the boy sells him

"black" to another street arab he slips the negro's hand into that of the buyer and loses himself in the crowd.) The price of a negro on the "flying market" is based on the lavishness and recklessness of his expenditure, on his avidity for food and drink, on the way in which he smiles, lights a cigarette, looks at a woman. A hundred expert eager eyes follow the negro's every gesture, count the coins that he draws from his pocket, observe his pink-and-black fingers with their pale cuticles. There are boys who are very expert at the precise and rapid calculation which the traffic entails. (In two months Pasquale Sole, a boy of ten, earned from the purchase and resale of negroes on the "flying market" about six thousand dollars, with which he acquired a house in the vicinity of the Piazza Olivella.) As he wanders from bar to bar, from inn to inn, from brothel to brothel, as he smiles, drinks and eats, as he caresses the arms of a girl, the negro is oblivious of the fact that he has become a medium of exchange, he does not even suspect that he has been bought and sold like a slave.

It was certainly not dignified, the position of the negro soldiers in the American Army—so kind, so black, so respectable—who had won the war, landed at Naples as conquerors, and now found themselves being bought and sold like unfortunate slaves. But in Naples this kind of thing has been happening for a thousand years. Such was the experience of the Normans, the Angevins and the Aragonese, of Charles VIII of France, and of Garibaldi and Mussolini themselves. The people of Naples would have perished of hunger centuries ago if every so often they had not been lucky enough to be able to buy and resell all those, Italians and foreigners, who presumed to land at Naples as conquerors and overlords.

If the cost of hiring a negro soldier on the "flying market" for a few hours was only twenty or thirty dollars, the cost of hiring him for one or two months was high, ranging from three hundred to a thousand dollars or even more. An American negro was a goldmine. The owner of a negro slave possessed a sure income and a source of easy gain. He had solved the problem of making a living, and often grew rich. The risk, certainly, was great, since the M.P.s, who understood nothing about the affairs of Europe, nourished an inexplicable aversion to the traffic in negroes. But in spite of the M.P.s the negro-trade was held in high honour in Naples. There was not a family, however, poor, which did not possess its negro slave.

A negro's master treated his slave as an honoured guest. He offered him food and drink, filled his glass with wine and fritters, let him dance with his own daughters to the strains of an old gramophone, made him sleep, along with all the members of his family, male and female, in his own bed—one of those vast beds which occupy a large part of every Neapolitan *basso*. And the negro would come home every evening with gifts of sugar, cigarettes, spam, bacon, bread, white flour, vests, stockings, shoes, uniforms, bedspreads, overcoats, and vast quantities of caramels. The "black" was delighted by the quiet family life, the decorousness and warmth of his welcome, the smiles of the women and children, the sight of the table laid for supper beneath the lamp, the wine, the *pizza* cheese, the sweet fritters. After a few days the fortunate negro, having become the slave of this poor, warm-hearted Neapolitan family, would become engaged to one of his master's daughters; and he would return home every evening laden with gifts for his *fiancee*—cases of corned beef, bags of sugar and flour, cartons of cigarettes, and treasures of every kind, which he filched from the military stores, and which the father and brothers of *his fiancée* sold to dealers on the black market. It was also possible to buy white slaves in the jungle that was Naples; but they showed little return, and so cost less. Still, a white soldier from the P.X. cost as much as a coloured driver.

Drivers were the most expensive of all. A black driver cost up to two thousand dollars. There were drivers who presented their *fiancées* with complete vehicles laden with flour, sugar, tyres and tins of petrol. One day a black driver gave his *fiancée*, Concetta Esposito, of the Vicolo della Torretta, situated at the end of the Riviera di Chiaia, a heavy tank—a Sherman. In two hours the tank, which had been hidden in a yard, was stripped of all its screws and dismantled. In two hours it disappeared.

not a trace was left of it save for a patch of oil on the flagstones of the yard. One night a Liberty ship which had arrived from America a few hours before in convoy with ten other ships, was stolen from Naples harbour. Not only was the cargo stolen, but the ship itself. It vanished, and was never heard of again. All Naples, from Capodimonte to Posillipo, rocked with tumultuous laughter, as if convulsed by an earthquake. The Muses, the Graces, Juno, Minerva, Diana and all the Goddesses from Olympus who in the cool of the evening appear among the clouds above Vesuvius and look down on Naples could be seen laughing and clasping their bosoms with both hands, while Venus made the heavens shimmer with the flashing of her white teeth.

"How much does a Liberty ship cost on the black market, Jack?"

"Oh, ca ne cotâe pas cher, you damned fool!" Jack would reply turning red.

"You were right to post sentries on the bridges of your battleships. If you aren't careful they'll steal your fleet."

"To hell with you, Malaparte."

When, each evening, we came to the end of Via Toledo and arrived outside the famous Caffè Caflisch, which the French had requisitioned and turned into their *Foyer du soldat*, we used to slacken our pace in order to listen to Général Juin's soldiers talking French among themselves. It was a pleasure to us to hear the French language articulated by French voices. (Jack always spoke French to me. When, immediately after the Allied landing at Salerno, I was appointed liaison officer between the Italian Corps of Liberation and General Headquarters of the Peninsular Base Section, Jack, Staff Colonel Jack Hamilton, had at once asked me if I spoke French, and at my "Oui, mon colonel" he had flushed with joy. "Vous savez," he said to me, "il fait bon de parler francais. Le francais est une langue tres bon pour la sante.") At every hour of the day a small crowd of soldiers and sailors from Algeria, Madagascar, Morocco, Senegal, Tahiti and Indo-China would be standing about on the pavement outside the Caffè Caflisch, but their French was not that of La Fontaine, and we could not understand a word they said. Sometimes, however, if we strained our ears, we were lucky enough to catch a few French words pronounced with a Parisian or Marseillais accent. Jack would flush with joy, and seizing me by the arm would say: "Ecoute, Malaparte, écoute, voila du francais, du veritable francais!" We would both stop, deeply moved, and listen to those French voices, those French words, with the Menilmontant or La Cannebière intonation, and Jack would say: "Ah, que c'est bon! Ah, que ca fait du bien!"

Often, each lending the other courage, we would cross the threshold of the Caffè Caflisch. Timidly Jack would go up to the French sergeant who ran the *Foyer du soldat* and ask him with a blush: "Est-ce que, par hasard . . . est-ce qu'on a vu par là le lieutenant Lyautey?"

"Non, mon colonel," the sergeant would reply, "on ne l'a pas vu depuis quelques jours. Je regrette."

"Merci," Jack would say. "Au revoir, mon ami."

"Au revoir, mon colonel," the sergeant would say.

"Ah, que ca fait du bien, d'entendre parler francais!" Jack would say, red-faced, as we left the Caffè Caflisch.

Jack and I, accompanied by Captain Jimmy Wren, of Cleveland, Ohio, used often to go and eat hot *taralli*, fresh from the oven, in a baker's shop situated on the Pendino di Santa Barbara, that long gently sloping flight of steps which leads up from the Sadile di Porto in the direction of the Monastery of Santa Chiara.

The Pendino is a dismal alley. It owes its character not so much to its narrowness, carved out as it is between the high, mildewed-walls of ancient, sordid houses, or to the eternal darkness that reigns within it even on sunny days, as to the strangeness of its inhabitants.

In point of fact, the Pendino di Santa Barbara is famous for the many female dwarfs who reside in

They are so small that they barely come up to the knee of a man of average height. Repulsive and wrinkled, they are among the ugliest of their kind in the world. There are in Spain female dwarfs of great beauty, with well-proportioned limbs and features. And I have seen some in England who are truly exquisite, pink-skinned and fair-haired, like miniature Venuses. But the female dwarfs of the Pendino di Santa Barbara are frightful creatures. All of them, even the youngest, look like very old women, so wizened are their faces, so creased their foreheads, so thin and faded their dishevelled locks.

The most astounding thing about that noisome alley, with its horrible population of dwarf women, is the handsomeness of the men, who are tall and have very dark eyes and hair, leisurely, noble gestures and clear, resonant voices. There are no male dwarfs to be seen on the Pendino di Santa Barbara, a fact which encourages the belief that they die in infancy or that this lack of inches is a monstrous legacy inherited only by the women.

These dwarf women spend the whole day sitting on the doorsteps of the *bassi* or squatting on tiny stools at the entrances to their lairs, croaking to one another in frog-like voices. Their shortness of stature seems prodigious against the background of the furniture that fills their dark caverns—chests of drawers, vast cupboards, beds that look like giant's couches. To reach the furniture the dwarf women climb on chairs and benches; they hoist themselves up with their arms, making use of the ends of the high iron beds. And anyone climbing the steps of the Pendino di Santa Barbara for the first time feels like Gulliver in the Kingdom of Lilliput, or a servant at the Court of Madrid among Velazquez's dwarfs. The foreheads of these female dwarfs are scored with the same deep wrinkles as furrow the foreheads of the horrible old women portrayed by Goya. Nor should this Spanish analogy be thought arbitrary, for the district is Hispanic in character and still alive with memories of the long years when Naples was subject to Castilian domination. There is an air of old Spain about the streets, alleys, houses and mansions, the strong, sweet smells, the guttural voices, the long, musical laments that echo from balcony to balcony, and the raucous strains of the gramophones that issue from the depths of the dark caverns.

*Taralli* are little cakes made of sweet pastry; and the bakery halfway up the steps of the Pendino from which at all hours of the day there emanates the appetizing smell of fresh, crisp *taralli*, is famous throughout Naples. When the baker thrusts his long wooden shovel into the red-hot mouth of the oven the dwarf women ran up, stretching out their little hands, which are as dark and wrinkled as the hands of monkeys. Uttering loud cries in their raucous little voices they seize the dainty *taralli*, and hot and steaming, hobble rapidly to different parts of the alley, and deposit the *taralli* on shining brass trays. Then they sit on the doorsteps of their hovels with the trays on their knees and wait for customers, singing "*Oh li taralli! oh li taralli belli cauri!*" The smell of the *taralli* spreads all through the Pendino di Santa Barbara, and the dwarf women, squatting on their doorsteps, croak and laugh among themselves. And one, a young one perhaps, sings at a little window high up, and looks like a great spider poking its hairy head out of a crack in the wall.

Bald, toothless dwarf women go up and down the slimy stairway, supporting themselves with sticks or crutches, reeling along on their little short legs, lifting their knees up to their chins in order to mount the steps, or drag themselves along on all fours, whimpering and slobbering. They look like the little monsters in the paintings of Breughel or Bosch, and one day Jack and I saw one of them sitting on the threshold of a cavern with a sick dog in her arms. As it lay on her lap, in her tiny arms, it seemed a gigantic animal, a monstrous wild beast. Up came a companion of hers, and the two of them seized the sick dog, the one by the hind legs, the other by the head, and with great difficulty carried it into the hovel. It seemed as if they were carrying a wounded dinosaur. The voices that ascend from the depths of the caverns are shrill and guttural, and the wails of the dreadful children, who are tiny and wrinkled, like old dolls, resemble the mewling of a dying kitten. If you enter one of these hovels you



see, in the fetid half-light, those great spiders with enormous heads dragging themselves across the floor, and you have to take care not to crush them beneath the soles of your shoes.

Occasionally we saw some of these dwarf women climbing the steps of the Pendino in the company of gigantic American soldiers, white or coloured, with moist, shining eyes. Tugging them along by the trouser-legs, they would push them into their lairs. (The white soldiers, thank God, were always drunk.) I shuddered when I visualized the strange unions of those enormous men and those little monsters, on those high, vast beds.

And I would say to Jimmy Wren: "I am glad to see that those little dwarfs and your handsome soldiers like each other. Aren't you glad too, Jimmy?"

"Of course I'm glad too," Jimmy would answer, furiously chewing his gum.

"Do you think they'll get married?" I would say.

"Why not?" Jimmy would answer.

"Jimmy is a nice guy," Jack would say, "but you mustn't provoke him. He flares up easily."

"I'm a nice guy, too," I would say, "and I'm glad to think that you have come from America to improve the Italian race. But for you those poor dwarfs would have remained spinsters. By ourselves we poor Italians couldn't have done anything about it. It's a lucky thing that you people have come from America to marry our dwarf women."

"You will certainly be invited to the wedding breakfast," Jack would say, "Tu pourras prononcer un discours magnifique."

"Oui, Jack, un discours magninque. But don't you think, Jimmy," I would say, "that the Allied military authorities ought to encourage marriages between those dwarf women and your handsome soldiers? It would be an excellent thing if your soldiers married those little dwarfs. As a race you are too tall. America needs to come down to our level, don't you think so, Jimmy?"

"Yes, I think so," Jimmy would answer, giving me a sidelong glance.

"You are too tall," I would say, "too handsome. It's immoral that the world should contain a race of men who are so tall, so handsome and so healthy. I should like all the American soldiers to get married to those little dwarfs. Those 'Italian brides' would score a tremendous hit in American civilization needs shorter legs."

"To hell with you," Jimmy would say, spitting on the ground.

"II va te caresser la figure, si tu insistes," Jack would say.

"Yes, I know. Jimmy is a nice guy," I would say, laughing to myself.

It made me feel sick at heart to laugh in that way. But I should have been happy, truly happy, if all the American soldiers had one day gone back to America arm in arm with all the little dwarf women of Naples, Italy and Europe.

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The "plague" had broken out in Naples on October 1st, 1943—the very day on which the Allied armies had entered that ill-starred city as liberators. October 1st, 1943, is a memorable date in the history of Naples, both because it marks the beginning of the liberation of Italy and Europe from the anguish, shame and sufferings of war and slavery, and because it exactly coincided with the outbreak of the terrible plague which gradually spread from the unhappy city all over Italy and all over Europe.

The appalling suspicion that the fearful disease had been brought to Naples by the liberators themselves was certainly unjust; but it became a certainty in the minds of the people when they perceived, with a mixture of amazement and superstitious terror, that the Allied soldiers remained strangely immune from the contagion. Pink-faced, calm and smiling, they moved about in the midst of the plague-stricken mob without contracting the loathsome disease, which gathered its harvest of victims solely from among the civilian population, not only in Naples itself, but even in the country districts, spreading like a patch of oil into the territory liberated by the Allied armies as they

laboriously drove the Germans northwards.

But it was strictly forbidden, under threat of the severest penalties, to insinuate in public that the plague had been brought to Italy by the liberators. And it was dangerous to repeat the allegation in private, even in an undertone, since among the many loathsome effects of the plague the most loathsome was that it engendered in its victims a mad passion, a voluptuous avidity for delation. No sooner were they stricken with the disease than one and all began to inform against fathers, mothers, brothers, sons, husbands, lovers, relations and dearest friends—but never against themselves. Indeed one of the most surprising and repulsive characteristics of this extraordinary plague was that it transformed the human conscience into a horrible, noisome ulcer.

The only remedy which the British and American military authorities had discovered for the disease was to forbid the Allied soldiers to enter the most seriously infected areas of the city. On every wall one read the legends "Off Limits" and "Out of Bounds," surmounted by the aulic emblem of the plague—a black circle within which were depicted two black bars in the form of a cross, similar to the pattern of crossed shin-bones that appears beneath a skull on the saddle-cloth of a funeral carriage.

Within a short space of time the whole of Naples was declared "off limits" with the exception of a few streets in the centre of the city. But the areas most frequented by the liberators were in fact those which were "off limits," i.e. the most infected and therefore forbidden areas, since it is in the nature of man, and especially soldiers of all ages and every army, to prefer forbidden things to those that are permitted. And so the contagion, whether it had been brought to Naples by the liberators, or whether the latter carried it from one part of the city to another, from the infected areas to the healthy, very soon reached a terrible pitch of violence, rendered abominable, almost diabolical, by its grotesque and obscene manifestations, which were suggestive of a macabre public celebration, a funereal *kermesse*. Drunken negroes danced with women who were almost or completely naked in the squares and streets in the midst of the wreckage of the houses that had been destroyed in the airraids. There was a mad orgy of drinking, eating, gaiety, singing, laughing, prodigality and revelry, amid the frightful stench that emanated from the countless hundreds of corpses buried beneath the ruins.

This was a plague profoundly different from, but no less horrible than, the epidemics which from time to time devastated Europe during the Middle Ages. The extraordinary thing about this most modern of diseases was that it corrupted not the body but the soul. The limbs remained seemingly intact, but within the integument of the healthy flesh the soul festered and rotted. It was a kind of moral plague, against which it seemed that there was no defence. The first to be infected were the women, who in every nation constitute the weakest bulwark against vice, and an open door to every form of evil. And this seemed an amazing and most lamentable thing, inasmuch as during the years of slavery and war, right up to the day of the promised and eagerly awaited liberation, the women—not only in Naples, but throughout Italy and Europe—had proved, amid the universal wretchedness and misfortune, that they possessed greater dignity and greater strength of mind than the men. In Naples and in every other city of Europe the women had refused to give themselves to the Germans. Only the prostitutes had had relations with the enemy, and even they had not done so openly, but in secret either to avoid having to endure the sharp revulsion of popular feeling or because they themselves considered that to have such relations was to be guilty of the most infamous crime that a woman could commit during those years.

And now, as a result of this loathsome plague, which first corrupted the feminine sense of honour and dignity, prostitution on the most appalling scale had brought shame to every hovel and every mansion. But why call it shame? Such was the baneful power of the contagion that self-prostitution had become a praiseworthy act, almost a proof of patriotism, and all, men and women, far from blushing at the thought of it, seemed to glory in their own and the universal degradation. True, many whose sense of justice was warped by despair, almost made excuses for the plague, implying that the

women used the disease as a pretext for becoming prostitutes, and that they sought in the plague the justification of their shame.

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But a more intimate knowledge of the disease subsequently revealed that such a suspicion was mischievous. For the first to despair of their lot were the women; and I myself have heard many bewailing and cursing this pitiless plague which drove them, with an irresistible violence their feeble virtue was powerless to withstand, to prostitute themselves like bitches. Such, alas, is the nature of women, who often seek to buy with tears forgiveness for their deeds of shame, and pity too. But in this case one must perforce forgive them and have pity on them.

If such was the lot of the women, no less piteous and horrible was that of the men. No sooner were they infected than they lost all self-respect. They lent themselves to the most ignoble transactions and committed the most sordid acts of self-abasement; they dragged themselves on all fours through the mire, kissing the boots of their "liberators" (who were disgusted by such extreme and unmasked-filth abjectness), not only to obtain pardon for the sufferings and humiliations which they had undergone during the years of slavery and war, but so that they might have the honour of being trampled underfoot by their new masters; they spat on their own country's flag and publicly sold their own wives, daughters and mothers. They did all this, they said, to save their country. Yet those who seemed on the surface to be immune from the disease fell sick of a nauseating malady which made them ashamed of being Italians and even of belonging to the human race. It must be admitted that they did all they could to be unworthy of the name of men. Few indeed were those who remained free from taint, their consciences seemingly impervious to the disease; and they went about in fear and trembling, despised by all, unwelcome witnesses of the universal shame.

The suspicion, which later became a conviction, that the plague had been brought to Europe by the liberators themselves had filled the people with profound and heart-felt grief. Although it is an ancient tradition that the vanquished hate their conquerors, the people of Naples did not hate the Allies. They had awaited them with longing, they had welcomed them with joy. Their thousand-year-long experience of wars and foreign invasions had taught them that it is the habit of conquerors to reduce those whom they have vanquished to slavery. Instead of slavery, the Allies had brought them freedom. And the people had immediately loved these magnificent soldiers—so young, so handsome, so well-groomed—whose teeth were so white and whose lips were so red. In all those centuries of invasion and wars won and lost, Europe had never seen such elegant, clean, courteous soldiers. Always they were newly shaven; their uniforms were impeccable; their ties were tied with meticulous care; their shirts were always spotless; their shoes were eternally new and shining; they had never a tear in the trousers or at their elbows, never a button missing. Such were these wonderful armies, born, like Venus, of the sea foam. They contained not a soldier who had a boil, a decayed tooth, even a pimple on his face. Never had Europe seen soldiers who were so free from infection, without the smallest microbe either in the folds of their skin or in the recesses of their consciences. And what hands they had—white, well looked after, always protected by immaculate chamois-leather gloves! But what touched the people of Naples most of all was the kindness of their liberators, especially the Americans: their urbane nonchalance, their humanity, their innocent, cordial smiles—the smiles of honest, good-hearted, ingenuous, over-grown boys. If ever it was an honour to lose a war, it was certainly a great honour for the people of Naples, and for all the other conquered peoples of Europe to have lost this one to soldiers who were so courteous, elegant and neatly dressed, so good-hearted and generous.

And yet everything that these magnificent soldiers touched was at once corrupted. No sooner did the luckless inhabitants of the liberated countries grasp the hands of their liberators than they began to fester and to stink. It was enough that an Allied soldier should lean out of his jeep to smile at a woman, to give her face a fleeting caress, and the same woman, who until that moment had preserved

her dignity and purity, would change into a prostitute. It was enough that a child should put into its mouth a caramel offered to it by an American soldier, and its innocent soul would be corrupted.

The liberators themselves were terrified and deeply affected by this dire scourge. "It is human to feel compassion for the afflicted," writes Boccaccio in his introduction to the *Decameron*, with reference to the terrible plague which swept Florence in 1348. But the Allied soldiers, especially the Americans, faced with the pitiable spectacle of the plague of Naples, did not only feel compassion for the unhappy people of that city: they felt compassion for themselves as well. The reason was that for some time past the suspicion had been growing in their ingenuous and honest minds that the source of the terrible contagion was in their frank, timid smiles, in their eyes, so full of human sympathy, in their affectionate caresses. The source of the plague was in their compassion, in their very desire to help these unfortunate people, to alleviate their miseries, to succour them in the tremendous disaster that had overtaken them. The source of the disease was in the very hand which they stretched out in brotherhood to this conquered people.

Perhaps it was written that the freedom of Europe must be born not of liberation, but of the plague. Perhaps it was written that, just as liberation had been born of the sufferings of war and slavery, so freedom must be born of the new and terrible sufferings caused by the plague which liberation had brought with it. The price of freedom is high—far higher than that of slavery. And it is not paid in gold, nor in blood, nor in the most noble sacrifices, but in cowardice, in prostitution, in treachery, and in everything that is rotten in the human soul.

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On that day too we crossed the threshold of the *Foyer de soldat*, and Jack, going up to the French sergeant, asked him timidly, almost in confidence, "si on avait vu par là le lieutenant Lyautey."

"Oui, mon colonel, je l'ai vu tout à l'heure," replied the sergeant with a smile. "Attendez un instant, mon colonel, je vais voir s'il est toujours là."

"Voilà un sergent bien aimable," said Jack to me, flushing with pleasure. "Les sergents français sont les plus aimables sergents du monde."

"Je regrette, mon colonel," said the sergeant, coming back after a few moments, "le lieutenant Lyautey vient justement de partir."

"Merci, vous êtes bien aimable," said Jack. "Au revoir, mon ami."

"Au revoir, mon colonel," replied the sergeant.

"Ah, qu'il fait bon d'entendre parler français," said Jack as we went out of the *Caffè Caftisch*. His face had lit up with childish joy, and at such moments I felt that I really liked him. I was glad to like a better man than myself. I had always despised or felt bitter towards better men than myself, and this was the first time I had ever been glad to like such a man.

"Let's go and look at the sea, Malaparte."

Crossing the *Piazza Reale*, we descended the *Scesa del Gigante* and leaned on the parapet at the bottom. "C'est un des plus anciens parapets de l'Europe," said Jack who knew the whole of Rimbaud by heart.

The sun was setting, and little by little the sea was turning the colour of wine, which is the colour of the sea in Homer. But in the distance, between Sorrento and Capri, the water and the high rugged cliffs, the mountains and their shadows were slowly taking on a flame-bright coral hue, as if the coral reefs which cover the bottom of the gulf were slowly emerging from the depths of the sea, tinging the sky blood-red with their reflected glory, as of old. Far away the barrier of Sorrento, thick with orchards, rose from the sea like a hard slab of green marble, which the sun, as it sank below the farthest horizon, smote with its weary, oblique rays, bringing out the warm, golden glory of the oranges and the cold, bluish glitter of the lemons.

Like an ancient bone, thin and worn smooth by wind and rain, Vesuvius rose, solitary and naked

into the vast cloudless sky. Little by little it began to glow with a pink, furtive light, as if the fire within its womb were showing through its hard, pallid lava crust, which shone like ivory: until the moon, like an egg-shell, crossed the edge of the crater, and rose clear and ecstatic, marvellous and remote, into the blue abyss of the evening. From the furthest horizon, as if borne on the wind, the first shadows of the night climbed into the sky. And whether on account of the magical limpidity of the moonlight, or of the cold cruelty of that unreal sadness, like a presage of a happy death.

Ragged boys, seated on the stone parapet which rose sheer from the sea, sang with their eyes turned to the sky, their heads tilted slightly on to their shoulders. Their faces were pale and thin, their eyes blinded by hunger. They sang as the blind sing, their faces uplifted, their eyes fixed upon the heaven. Human hunger has a wonderfully sweet, pure voice. There is nothing human about the voice of hunger. It is a voice that arises from a mysterious level of man's nature, wherein lie the roots of that profound sense of life which is life itself, our most secret, most intense life. The air was clear and sweet to the lips. A light breeze, redolent of salt and seaweed, blew from the sea. The mournful cry of the gulls rippled the golden reflection of the moon upon the waves, and far away, low on the horizon, the pallid ghost of Vesuvius sank little by little into the silver mist of the night. That cruel, inhuman scene, so insensible to the hunger and despair of men, was made purer and less real by the singing of the boys.

"There is no kindness," said Jack, "no compassion in this marvellous Nature."

"It is malignant," I said. "It hates us, it is our enemy. It hates men."

"Elle aime nous voir souffrir," said Jack in a low voice.

"It stares at us with cold eyes, full of frozen hatred and contempt."

"Before it," said Jack, "I feel guilty, ashamed, miserable. It is not Christian. It hates men because they suffer."

"It is jealous of men's sufferings," I said.

I liked Jack because he alone, among all my American friends, felt guilty, ashamed and miserable before the cruel, inhuman beauty of that sky, that sea, those islands far away on the horizon. He alone realized that this Nature is not Christian, that it lies outside the frontiers of Christianity, and that that scene was not the face of Christ, but the image of a world without God, in which men are left alone to suffer without hope. He alone realized how much mystery there is in the story and the lives of the people of Naples, and how their story and their lives are so little dependent on the will of man. There were, among my American friends, many intelligent, cultured and sensitive young men; but they despised Naples, Italy and Europe, they despised us because they believed that we alone were responsible for our miseries and misfortunes, our acts of cowardice, our crimes, our perfidies, our infamies. They did not understand what mystery and inhumanity there is behind our miseries and our misfortunes. Some said: "You are not Christians: you are pagans." And there was a hint of scorn in their voices as they uttered the word "pagans." I liked Jack because he alone realized that the word "pagan" does not in itself reveal the deep-seated, historic, mysterious causes of our suffering, and that our miseries, our misfortunes, or infamies, our way of being miserable and happy, the very reasons for our greatness and our degradation, are outside the realm of Christian ethics.

Although he called himself Cartesian, affecting to put his trust wholly and always in reason and to believe that reason can probe and explain everything, his attitude to Naples, Italy and Europe was one of affection tempered both with respect and with suspicion. To him, as to all Americans, Naples had been an unexpected and distressing revelation. He had believed he was setting foot in a world dominated by reason and ruled by the human conscience; and he had found himself without warning in a mysterious country, where men and the circumstances that make up their lives seemed to be governed not by reason and conscience, but by obscure subterranean forces.

Jack had travelled all over Europe, but he had never been to Italy. He had landed at Salerno on September 9th, 1943, from the deck of an L.S.T.—a landing-barge—amid the din and smoke of the

explosions and the hoarse cries of the soldiers as they hobbled rapidly across the sands of Paestum under the fire of German machine-guns. In his ideal Cartesian Europe, the *alte Kontinent* of Goethe governed by mind and reason, Italy was still the land of his beloved Virgil and Horace. It suggested to his imagination the placid green and blue panorama of his own Virginia, where he had completed his studies and spent the better part of his life, and where he had his home, his family and his books. In the Italy of his heart the peristyles of the Georgian houses of Virginia and the marble columns of the Forum, Vermont Hill and the Palatine combined in his mind's eye to form a familiar scene, in which the brilliant green of the fields and woods blended with the brilliant white of the marble under the limpid blue sky like that which stretches in an arch above the Capitol.

When, at dawn on September 9th, 1943, Jack had leapt from the deck of an L.S.T. on to the beach at Paestum, near Salerno, he had seen a wonderful vision rising before his eyes through the red cloud of dust thrown up by the caterpillars of the tanks, the explosions of the German grenades and the tumult of the men and machines hurrying up from the sea. On the edge of a plain thickly covered with myrtles and cypresses, to which the bare mountains of Cilento, so like the mountains of Latium, provide a background, he had seemed to see the columns of the Temple of Neptune. Ah, this was Italy, the Italy of Virgil, the Italy of Aeneas! And he had wept for joy, he had wept with religious emotion, throwing himself on his knees upon the sandy shores, as Aeneas had done when he landed from the Trojan trireme on the sandy beach at the mouth of the Tiber, opposite the mountains of Latium, with their sprinkling of castles and white temples set amid the deep green of the ancient Latin woods.

But the classical setting of the Doric columns of the temples of Paestum concealed from his eyes a secret, mysterious Italy. It concealed Naples, that terrible, wonderful prototype of an unknown Europe situated outside the realm of Cartesian logic—that *other* Europe of whose existence he had until that day had only a vague suspicion, and whose mysteries and secrets, now that he was gradually probing them, filled him with a wondrous terror.

"Naples," I told him, "is the most mysterious city in Europe. It is the only city of the ancient world that has not perished like Ilium, Nineveh and Babylon. It is the only city in the world that did not founder in the colossal shipwreck of ancient civilization. Naples is a Pompeii which was never buried. It is not a city: it is a world—the ancient, pre-Christian world—that has survived intact on the surface of the modern world. You could not have chosen a more dangerous place than Naples for a landing in Europe. Your tanks run the risk of being swallowed up in the black slime of antiquity, as in quicksand. If you had landed in Belgium, Holland, Denmark or even in France, your scientific spirit, your technical knowledge, your vast wealth of material resources might have given you victory not merely over the German Army, but over the very spirit of Europe—that *other*, secret Europe of which Naples is the mysterious image, the naked ghost. But here in Naples your tanks, your guns, your machines provoke a smile. They are scrap-iron. Jack, do you remember the words of the Neapolitan who, on the day you entered Naples, was watching your endless columns of tanks passing along Via Toledo? '*What beautiful rust!*' Here, your particular American brand of humanity stands revealed in all its nakedness—defenceless, dangerously vulnerable. You are only big boys, Jack. You cannot understand Naples, you will never understand Naples."

"Je crois," said Jack, "que Naples n'est pas impénétrable à la raison. Je suis cartésien, hélas!"

"Do you think, then, that Cartesian logic can help you, for instance, to understand Hitler?"

"Why particularly Hitler?"

"Because Hitler too is an element in the mystery of Europe, because Hitler too belongs to that *other* Europe which Cartesian logic cannot penetrate. Do you think, then, that you can explain Hitler solely with the help of Descartes?"

"Je l'explique parfaitement," replied Jack.

Then I told him that Heidelberg *witz* which all the students in the German universities laughing

pass from one to the other. At a conference of German scientists held at Heidelberg, all present found themselves agreed after lengthy discussion in asserting that the world can be explained with the aid of reason alone. At the end of the discussion an old professor, who until that moment had remained silent, with a silk hat jammed down over his eyes, got up and said: "You who explain everything—could you tell me how on earth this thing has appeared on my head tonight?" And, slowly removing the silk hat, he revealed a cigar, a genuine Havana, which was projecting from his bald cranium.

"Ah, ah, c'est merveilleux!" said Jack, laughing. "Do you mean, then, that Hitler is a Havana cigar?"

"No, I mean that Hitler is *like* that Havana cigar."

"C'est merveilleux! un cigare!" said Jack; and he added, as though seized by a sudden inspiration: "Have a drink, Malaparte." But he corrected himself, and said in French: "Allons boire quelque chose."

The bar of the P.B.S. was crowded with officers who already had many glasses' start on us. We sat down in a corner and began to drink. Jack looked into his glass, and laughed; he banged his fist on his knee, and laughed; and every so often he exclaimed: "C'est merveilleux! un cigare!"—until his eyes grew dim and he said to me, laughing: "Tu crois vraiment qu'Hitler ..."

"Mais oui, naturellement."

Then we went in to supper, and sat down at the big table reserved for senior officers of the P.B.S. All the officers were in a merry mood, and they smiled at me sympathetically because I was "the bastard Italian liaison officer, that bastard son of a gun." At a certain point Jack began telling the story of the conference of German scientists at Heidelberg University, and all the senior officers of the P.B.S. looked at me in amazement, exclaiming: "What? A cigar? Do you mean that Hitler is a cigar?"

"He means that Hitler is a Havana cigar," said Jack, laughing.

And Colonel Brand, offering me a cigar across the table, said to me with a sympathetic smile: "Do you like cigars? This is a genuine Havana."

## CHAPTER II - THE VIRGIN OF NAPLES

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"HAVE you ever seen a virgin?" Jimmy asked me one day as we came out of the baker's shop on the Pendino di Santa Barbara, crunching the lovely hot, crisp *taralli* between our teeth.

"Yes, but only from a distance,"

"No, I mean close up. Have you ever seen a virgin close up?"

"No, never close up!"

"Come on, Malaparte," said Jimmy.

At first I was unwilling to follow him. I knew that he would show me something distressing and humiliating, some appalling evidence of the depths of physical and moral humiliation to which man can sink in his despair. I do not like to witness the spectacle of human baseness; it is repugnant to me to sit, as judge or as spectator, watching men as they descend the last rungs of the ladder of degradation. I am always afraid they will turn round and smile at me.

"Come on, come on, don't be silly," said Jimmy walking ahead of me through the maze of alleys that is Forcella.

I do not like to see how low man can stoop in order to live. I preferred the war to the "plague" which, after the liberation, had defiled, corrupted and humiliated us all—men, women and children. Before the liberation we had fought and suffered *in order not to die*. Now we were fighting and suffering *in order to live*. There is a profound difference between fighting to avoid death and fighting in order to live. Men who fight to avoid death preserve their dignity and one and all—men, women and children—defend it jealously, tenaciously, fiercely. The men did not bow the knee. They fled into the mountains and the woods, they lived in caves, they fought like wolves against the invaders. They were fighting to avoid death. It was a noble, dignified, honest fight. The women did not throw their bodies on to the black market in order to buy lipsticks, silk stockings, cigarettes or bread. They suffered the pangs of hunger, but they did not sell themselves. They did not sell their men to the enemy. They were willing to see their own children die of hunger rather than sell themselves or their men. Only the prostitutes sold themselves to the enemy. Before their liberation the peoples of Europe suffered with wonderful dignity. They fought with their heads high. They were fighting *to avoid death*. And when men fight to avoid death they cling with a tenacity born of desperation to all that constitutes the living and eternal part of human life, the essence, the noblest and purest element of life: dignity, pride, freedom of conscience. They fight to save their souls.

But after the liberation men had had to fight *in order to live*. It is a humiliating, horrible thing, a shameful necessity, a fight for life. Only for life. Only to save one's own skin. It is no longer a fight against oppression, a fight for freedom, for human dignity, for honour. It is a fight against hunger. It is a fight for a crust of bread, for a little fuel, for a rag with which to cover the nakedness of one's own children, for a handful of straw on which to lie. When men are fighting in order to live, everything—even an empty jar, a cigar-stub, a piece of orange-peel, a crust of dry bread rescued from the rubbish-heap, a meatless bone—everything has for them an enormous, decisive value. To live, men will perform the meanest actions; to live, they will stoop to every sort of infamy, every sort of crime. For a crust of bread we are ready, all of us, to sell our own wives, or own daughters, to defile our own mothers, to sell our brothers and friends, to prostitute ourselves to other men. We are ready to grovel down on our knees, to grovel, to lick the boots of any who can assuage our hunger, to bend our backs beneath the whip, smilingly to wipe our cheeks when men have spat upon us; and all this with a humble, gentle smile, with eyes full of a ravenous, animal hope, a stupendous hope.

I preferred the war to the plague. Within the space of a day, within a few hours, all—men, women and children—had been infected by the horrible, mysterious disease. What amazed and terrified the people was the sudden, violent, fatal character of that fearful epidemic. The plague had been able



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