



Mistral, William Faulkner

## Mistral

I

IT WAS THE last of the Milanese brandy. I drank, and passed the bottle to Don, who lifted the flask until the liquor slanted yellowly in the narrow slot in the leather jacket, and while he held it so the soldier came up the path, his tunic open at the throat, pushing the bicycle.

He was a young man, with a bold lean face. He gave us a surly good day and looked at the flask a moment as he passed. We watched him disappear beyond the crest, mounting the bicycle as he went out of sight.

Don took a mouthful, then he poured the rest out. It splattered on the parched earth, pocking it for a fading moment. He shook the flask to the ultimate drop. "Salut," he said, returning the flask. "Thanks, O gods. My Lord, if I thought I'd have to go to bed with any more of that in my stomach."

"It's too bad, the way you have to drink it," I said. "Just have to drink it." I stowed the flask away and we went on, crossing the crest. The path began to descend, still in shadow.

The air was vivid, filled with sun which held a quality beyond that of mere light and heat, and a sourceless goat bell somewhere beyond the next turn of the path, distant and unimpeded.

"I hate to see you lugging the stuff along day after day," Don said.

"That's the reason I do. You couldn't drink it, and you wouldn't throw it away."

"Throw it away? It cost ten lire. What did I buy it for?"

"God knows," Don said. Against the sun-filled valley the trees were like the bars of a grate, the path a gap in the bars, the valley blue and sunny. The goat bell was somewhere ahead. A fainter path turned off at right angles, steeper than the broad one which we were following. "He went that way," Don said.

"Who did?" I said. Don was pointing to the faint mark of bicycle tires where they had turned into the fainter path.

"See."

"This one must not have been steep enough for him," I said.

"He must have been in a hurry."

"He sure was, after he made that turn."

"Maybe there's a haystack at the bottom."

"Or he could run on across the valley and up the other mountain and then run back down that one and up this one again until his momentum gave out."

"Or until he starved to death," Don said.

"That's right," I said. "Did you ever hear of a man starving to death on a bicycle?"

“No,” Don said. “Did you?”

“No,” I said. We descended. The path turned, and then we came upon the goat bell. It was on a laden mule cropping with delicate tinkling jerks at the pathside near a stone shrine. Beside the shrine sat a man in corduroy and a woman in a bright shawl, a covered basket beside her. They watched us as we approached.

“Good day, signor,” Don said. “Is it far?”

“Good day, signori,” the woman said. The man looked at us. He had blue eyes with dissolving irises, as if they had been soaked in water for a long time. The woman touched his arm, then she made swift play with her fingers before his face. He said, in a dry metallic voice like a cicada’s:

“Good day, signori.”

“He doesn’t hear any more,” the woman said. “No, it is not far. From yonder you will see the roofs.”

“Good,” Don said. “We are fatigued. Might one rest here, signora?”

“Rest, signori,” the woman said. We slipped our packs and sat down. The sun slanted upon the shrine, upon the serene, weathered figure in the niche and upon two bunches of dried mountain asters lying there.

The woman was making play with her fingers before the man’s face. Her other hand in repose upon the basket beside her was gnarled and rough. Motionless, it had that rigid quality of unaccustomed idleness, not restful so much as quite spent, dead. It looked like an artificial hand attached to the edge of the shawl, as if she had donned it with the

shawl for conventional complement. The other hand, the one with which she talked to the man, was swift and supple as a prestidigitator's.

The man looked at us. "You walk, signori," he said in his light, cadenceless voice.

"Sì," we said. Don took out the cigarettes. The man lifted his hand in a slight, deprecatory gesture. Don insisted. The man bowed formally, sitting, and fumbled at the pack. The woman took the cigarette from the pack and put it into his hand. He bowed again as he accepted a light. "From Milano," Don said. "It is far."

"It is far," the woman said. Her fingers rippled briefly. "He has been there," she said.

"I was there, signori," the man said. He held the cigarette carefully between thumb and forefinger. "One takes care to escape the carriages."

"Yes." Don said. "Those without horses."

"Without horses," the woman said. "There are many. Even here in the mountains we hear of it."

"Many," Don said. "Always whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh."

"Sì," the woman said. "Even here I have seen it." Her hand rippled in the sunlight. The man looked at us quietly, smoking. "It was not like that when he was there, you see," she said.

"I am there long time ago, signori," he said. "It is far." He spoke in the same tone she had used, the same tone of grave and courteous explanation.

“It is far,” Don said. We smoked. The mule crooped with delicate, jerking tinkles of the bell. “But we can rest yonder,” Don said, extending his hand toward the valley swimming blue and sunny beyond the precipice where the path turned. “A bowl of soup, wine, a bed?”

The woman watched us across that serene and topless rampart of the deaf, the cigarette smoking close between thumb and finger. The woman’s hand flickered before his face. “Sì,” he said; “sì. With the priest: why not? The priest will take them in.” He said something else, too swift for me. The woman removed the checked cloth which covered the basket, and took out a wineskin. Don and I bowed and drank in turn, the man returning the bows.

“Is it far to the priest’s?” Don said.

The woman’s hand flickered with unbelievable rapidity. Her other hand, lying upon the basket, might have belonged to another body. “Let them wait for him there, then,” the man said. He looked at us. “There is a funeral today. You will find him at the church. Drink, signori.”

We drank in decorous turn, the three of us. The wine was harsh and sharp and potent. The mule crooped, its small bell tinkling, its shadow long in the slanting sun, across the path. “Who is it that’s dead, signora?” Don said.

“He was to have married the priest’s ward after this harvest,” the woman said; “the banns were read and all. A rich man, and not old. But two days ago, he died.”

The man watched her lips. “Tchk. He owned land, a house: so do I. It is nothing.”

“He was rich,” the woman said. “Because he was both young and fortunate, my man is jealous of him.”

“But not now,” the man said. “Eh, signori?”

“To live is good,” Don said. He said, e bello.

“It is good,” the man said; he also said, bello.

“He was to have married the priest’s niece, you say,” Don said.

“She is no kin to him,” the woman said. “The priest just raised her. She was six when he took her, without people, kin, of any sort. The mother was workhouse-bred. She lived in a hut on the mountain yonder. It was not known who the father was, although the priest tried for a long while to persuade one of them to marry her for the child’s—”

“One of which?” Don said.

“One of those who might have been the father, signor. But it was never known which one it was, until in 1916. He was a young man, a laborer; the next day we learned that the mother had gone too, to the war also, for she was never seen again by those who knew her until one of our boys came home after Caporetto, where the father had been killed, and told how the mother had been seen in a house in Milano that was not a good house.

So the priest went and got the child. She was six then, brown and lean as a lizard. She was hidden on the mountain when the priest got there; the house was empty. The priest pursued her among the rocks and captured her like a beast: she was half naked and without shoes and it winter time.”

“So the priest kept her,” Don said. “Stout fellow.”

“She had no people, no roof, no crust to call hers save what the priest gave her. But you would not know it. Always with a red or a green dress for Sundays and feast days, even at fourteen and fifteen, when a girl should be learning modesty and industry, to be a crown to her husband.

The priest had told that she would be for the church, and we wondered when he would make her put such away for the greater glory of God. But at fourteen and fifteen she was already the brightest and loudest and most tireless in the dances, and the young men already beginning to look after her, even after it had been arranged between her and him who is dead yonder.”

“The priest changed his mind about the church and got her a husband instead,” Don said.

“He found for her the best catch in this parish, signor. Young, and rich, with a new suit each year from the Milano tailor. Then the harvest came, and what do you think, signori? she would not marry him.”

“I thought you said the wedding was not to be until after this harvest,” Don said. “You mean, the wedding had already been put off a year before this harvest?”

“It had been put off for three years. It was made three years ago, to be after that harvest. It was made in the same week that Giulio Farinzale was called to the army. I remember how we were all surprised, because none had thought his number would come up so soon, even though he was a bachelor and without ties save an uncle and aunt.”



“Is that so?” Don said. “Governments surprise everybody now and then. How did he get out of it?”

“He did not get out of it.”

“Oh. That’s why the wedding was put off, was it?”

The woman looked at Don for a minute. “Giulio was not the fiancé’s name.”

“Oh, I see. Who was Giulio?”

The woman did not answer at once. She sat with her head bent a little. The man had been watching their lips when they spoke. “Go on,” he said; “tell them. They are men: they can listen to women’s tittle-tattle with the ears alone. They cackle, signori; give them a breathing spell, and they cackle like geese, Drink.”

“He was the one she used to meet by the river in the evenings; he was younger still: that was why we were surprised that his number should be called so soon. Before we had thought she was old enough for such, she was meeting him. And hiding it from the priest as skillfully as any grown woman could—” For an instant the man’s washed eyes glinted at us, quizzical.

“She was meeting this Giulio all the while she was engaged to the other one?” Don said.

“No. The engagement was later. We had not thought her old enough for such yet. When we heard about it, we said how an anonymous child is like a letter in the post office: the envelope might look like any other envelope, but when you open it . . . And the holy can be fooled by sin as quickly as you or I, signori. Quicker, because they are holy.”

“Did he ever find it out?” Don said.

“Yes. It was not long after. She would slip out of the house at dusk; she was seen, and the priest was seen, hidden in the garden to watch the house: a servant of the holy God forced to play watchdog for the world to see. It was not good, signori.”

“And then the young man got called suddenly to the army,” Don said. “Is that right?”

“It was quite sudden; we were all surprised. Then we thought that it was the hand of God, and that now the priest would send her to the convent. Then in that same week we learned that it was arranged between her and him who is dead yonder, to be after the harvest, and we said it was the hand of God that would confer upon her a husband beyond her deserts in order to protect His servant. For the holy are susceptible to evil, even as you and I, signori; they too are helpless before sin without God’s aid.”

“Tchk, tchk,” the man said. “It was nothing. The priest looked at her, too,” he said. “For a man is a man, even under a cassock. Eh, signori?”

“You would say so,” the woman said. “You without grace.”

“And the priest looked at her, too,” Don said.

“It was his trial, his punishment, for having been too lenient with her. And the punishment was not over: the harvest came, and we heard that the wedding was put off for a year: what do you think of that, signori? that a girl, come from what she had come from, to be given the chance which the priest had given her to save her from herself, from her blood . . .

We heard how they quarreled, she and the priest, of how she defied him, slipping out of the house after dark and going to the dances where her fiancé might see her or hear of it at any time.”

“Was the priest still looking at her?” Don said.

“It was his punishment, his expiation. So the next harvest came, and it was put off again, to be after the next harvest; the banns were not even begun. She defied him to that extent, signori, she, a pauper, and we all saying, ‘When will her fiancé hear of it, learn that she is no good, when there are daughters of good houses who had learned modesty and seemliness?’”

“You have unmarried daughters, signora?” Don said.

“Sì. One. Two have I married, one still in my house. A good girl, signori, if I do say it.”

“Tchk, woman,” the man said.

“That is readily believed,” Don said. “So the young man had gone to the army, and the wedding was put off for another year.”

“And another year, signori. And then a third year. Then it was to be after this harvest; within a month it was to have been. The banns were read; the priest read them himself in the church, the third time last Sunday, with him there in his new Milano suit and she beside him in the shawl he had given her — it cost a hundred lire — and a golden chain, for he gave her gifts suitable for a queen rather than for one who could not name her own father, and we believed that at last the priest had served his expiation out and that the evil had been lifted from his house

at last, since the soldier's time would also be up this fall. And now the fiancé is dead."

"Was he very sick?" Don said.

"It was very sudden. A hale man; one you would have said would live a long time. One day he was well, the second day he was quite sick. The third day he was dead. Perhaps you can hear the bell, with listening, since you have young ears." The opposite mountains were in shadow. Between, the valley lay invisible still. In the sunny silence the mule's bell tinkled in random jerks. "For it is in God's hands," the woman said. "Who will say that his life is his own?"

"Who will say?" Don said. He did not look at me. He said in English: "Give me a cigarette."

"You've got them."

"No, I haven't."

"Yes, you have. In your pants pocket."

He took out the cigarettes. He continued to speak in English. "And he died suddenly. And he got engaged suddenly. And at the same time, Giulio got drafted suddenly. It would have surprised you. Everything was sudden except somebody's eagerness for the wedding to be. There didn't seem to be any hurry about that, did there?"

"I don't know. I no spika."

“In fact, they seemed to stop being sudden altogether until about time for Giulio to come home again. Then it began to be sudden again. And so I think I’ll ask if priests serve on the draft boards in Italy.” The old man watched his lips, his washed gaze grave and intent. “And if this path is the main path down the mountain, and that bicycle turned off into that narrow one back there, what do you think of that, signori?”

“I think it was fine. Only a little sharp to the throat. Maybe we can get something down there to take away the taste.”

The man was watching our lips; the woman’s head was bent again; her stiff hand smoothed the checked cover upon the basket. “You will find him at the church, signori,” the man said.

“Yes,” Don said. “At the church.”

We drank again. The man accepted another cigarette with that formal and unflinching politeness, conferring upon the action something finely ceremonious yet not incongruous. The woman put the wineskin back into the basket and covered it again. We rose and took up our packs.

“You talk swiftly with the hand, signora,” Don said.

“He reads the lips too. The other we made lying in the bed in the dark. The old do not sleep so much. The old lie in bed and talk. It is not like that with you yet.”

“It is so. You have made the padrone many children, signora?”

“Sì. Seven. But we are old now. We lie in bed and talk.”

Before we reached the village the bell had begun to toll. From the gaunt steeple of the church the measured notes seemed to blow free as from a winter branch, along the wind. The wind began as soon as the sun went down.

We watched the sun touch the mountains, whereupon the sky lost its pale, vivid blueness and took on a faintly greenish cast, like glass, against which the recent crest, where the shrine faded with the dried handful of flowers beneath the fading crucifix, stood black and sharp. Then the wind began: a steady moving wall of air full of invisible particles of something.

Before it the branches leaned without a quiver, as before the pressure of an invisible hand, and in it our blood began to cool at once, even before we had stopped walking where the path became a cobbled street.

The bell still tolled. "Funny hour for a funeral," I said. "You'd think he would have kept a long time at this altitude. No need to be hurried into the ground like this."

"He got in with a fast gang," Don said. The church was invisible from here, shut off by a wall. We stood before a gate, looking into a court enclosed by three walls and roofed by a vine on a raftered trellis. It contained a wooden table and two backless benches. We stood at the gate, looking into the court, when Don said. "So this is Uncle's house."

"Uncle?"

“He was without ties save an uncle and aunt,” Don said. “Yonder, by the door.” The door was at the bottom of the court. There was a fire beyond it, and beside the door a bicycle leaned against the wall. “The bicycle, unconscious,” Don said.

“Is that a bicycle?”

“Sure. That’s a bicycle.” It was an old-style machine, with high back-swept handlebars like gazelle horns. We looked at it.

“The other path is the back entrance,” I said. “The family entrance.” We heard the bell, looking into the court.

“Maybe the wind doesn’t blow in there,” Don said. “Besides, there’s no hurry. We couldn’t see him anyway, until it’s over.”

“These places are hotels sometimes.” We entered. Then we saw the soldier. When we approached the table he came to the door and stood against the firelight, looking at us. He wore a white shirt now. But we could tell him by his legs. Then he went back into the house.

“So Malbrouck is home,” Don said.

“Maybe he came back for the funeral.” We listened to the bell. The twilight was thicker inside. Overhead the leaves streamed rigid on the wind, stippled black upon the livid translucent sky. The strokes of the bell sounded as though they too were leaves flattening away upon an inviolable vine in the wind.

“How did he know there was going to be one?” Don said.

“Maybe the priest wrote him a letter.”

“Maybe so,” Don said. The firelight looked good beyond the door. Then a woman stood in it, looking at us. “Good day, padrona,” Don said.

“Might one have a mouthful of wine here?” She looked at us, motionless against the firelight. She was tall. She stood tall and motionless against the firelight, not touching the door. The bell tolled. “She used to be a soldier too,” Don said. “She was a sergeant.”

“Maybe she was the colonel who ordered Malbrouck to go home.”

“No. He wasn’t moving fast enough when he passed us up yonder, for it to have been her.” Then the woman spoke:

“It is so, signori. Rest yourselves.” She went back into the house. We slipped our packs and sat down. We looked at the bicycle.

“Cavalry,” Don said. “Wonder why he came the back way.”

“All right,” I said.

“All right what?”

“All right. Wonder.”

“Is that a joke?”

“Sure. That’s a joke. It’s because we are old. We lie in the draft. That’s a joke too.”

“Tell me something that’s not a joke.”

“All right.”



“Did you hear the same thing I think I heard up there?”

“No spika. I love Italy. I love Mussolini.” The woman brought the wine. She set it on the table and was turning away. “Ask her,” I said. “Why don’t you?”

“All right. I will. — You have military in the house, signora?”

The woman looked at him. “It is nothing, signor. It is my nephew returned.”

“Finished, signora?”

“Finished, signor.”

“Accept our felicitations. He has doubtless many friends who will rejoice at his return.” She was thin, not old, with cold eyes, looking down at Don with brusque attention, waiting. “You have a funeral in the village today.” She said nothing at all. She just stood there, waiting for Don to get done talking. “He will be mourned,” Don said.

“Let us hope so,” she said. She made to go on; Don asked her about lodgings. There were none, she answered with immediate finality. Then we realized that the bell had ceased. We could hear the steady whisper of the wind in the leaves overhead.

“We were told that the priest—” Don said.

“Yes? You were told that the priest.”

“That we might perhaps find lodgings there.”

“Then you would do well to see the priest, signor.” She returned to the house. She strode with the long stride of a man into the firelight, and

disappeared. When I looked at Don, he looked away and reached for the wine.

“Why didn’t you ask her some more?” I said. “Why did you quit so soon?”

“She was in a hurry. Her nephew is just home from the army, she said. He came in this afternoon. She wants to be with him, since he is without ties.”

“Maybe she’s afraid he’ll be drafted.”

“Is that a joke too?”

“It wouldn’t be to me.” He filled the glasses. “Call her back. Tell her you heard that her nephew is to marry the priest’s ward. Tell her we want to give them a present. A stomach pump. That’s not a joke, either.”

“I know it’s not.” He filled his glass carefully. “Which had you rather do, or stay at the priest’s tonight?”

“Salut,” I said.

“Salut.” We drank. The leaves made a dry, wild, continuous sound.

“Wish it was still summer.”

“It would be pretty cold tonight, even in a barn.”

“Yes. Glad we don’t have to sleep in a barn tonight.”

“It wouldn’t be so bad, after we got the hay warm and got to sleep.”

“We don’t have to, though. We can get a good sleep and get an early start in the morning.”

I filled the glasses. "I wonder how far it is to the next village."

"Too far." We drank. "I wish it were summer. Don't you?"

"Yes." I emptied the bottle into the glasses. "Have some wine." We raised our glasses. We looked at one another. The particles in the wind seemed to drive through the clothing, through the flesh, against the bones, penetrating the brick and plaster of the walls to reach us.

"Salut."

"We said that before," Don said.

"All right. Salut, then."

"Salut."

We were young: Don, twenty-three; I, twenty-two. And age is so much a part of, so inextricable from, the place where you were born or bred. So that away from home, some distance away — space or time or experience away — you are always both older and eternally younger than yourself, at the same time.

We stood in the black wind and watched the funeral — priest, coffin, a meager clump of mourners — pass, their garments, and particularly the priest's rusty black, ballooning ahead of them, giving an illusion of unseemly haste, as though they were outstripping themselves across the harsh green twilight (the air was like having to drink iced lemonade in the winter time) and into the church. "We'll be out of the wind too," Don said.

"There's an hour of light yet."

“Sure; we might even reach the crest by dark.” He looked at me. Then I looked away. The red tiles of the roofs were black, too, now. “We’ll be out of the wind.” Then the bell began to toll again. “We don’t know anything. There’s probably not anything.

Anyway, we don’t know it. We don’t have to know it. Let’s get out of the wind.” It was one of those stark, square, stone churches, built by those harsh iron counts and bishops of Lombardy. It was built old; time had not even mellowed it, could not ever mellow it, not all of time could have.

They might have built the mountains too and invented the twilight in a dungeon underground, in the black ground. And beside the door the bicycle leaned. We looked at it quietly as we entered the church and we said quietly, at the same time:

“Beaver.”

“He’s one of the pallbearers,” Don said. “That’s why he came home.” The bell tolled. We passed through the chancel and stopped at the back of the church. We were out of the wind now, save for the chill eddies of it that licked in at our backs. We could hear it outside, ripping the slow strokes of the bell half-born out of the belfry, so that by the time we heard them, they seemed to have come back as echoes from a far distance.

The nave, groined upward into the gloom, dwarfed the meager clot of bowed figures. Beyond them, above the steady candles, the Host rose, soaring into sootlike shadows like festooned cobwebs, with a quality sorrowful and triumphant, like wings.

There was no organ, no music, no human sound at all at first. They just knelt there among the dwarfing gloom and the cold, serene, faint light of the candles. They might have all been dead. "It'll be dark long before they can get done," Don whispered.

"Maybe it's because of the harvest," I whispered. "They probably have to work all day. The living can't wait on the dead, you know."

"But, if he was as rich as they told us he was, it seems like . . ."

"Who buries the rich? Do the rich do it, or do the poor do it?"

"The poor do it," Don whispered. Then the priest was there, above the bowed heads. We had not seen him at first, but now he was there, shapeless, blurring out of the shadows below the candles, his face like a smudge, a thumb print, upon the gloom where the Host rose in a series of dissolving gleams like a waterfall; his voice filled the church, slow, steady, like wings beating against the cold stone, upon the resonance of wind in which the windless candles stood as though painted.

"And so he looked at her," Don whispered. "He had to sit across the table from her, say, and watch her. Watch her eating the food that made her change from nothing and become everything, knowing she had no food of her own and that it was his food that was doing it, and not for him changing.

You know: girls: they are not anything, then they are everything. You watch them become everything before your eyes. No, not eyes: it's the same in the dark. You know it before they do; it's not their becoming everything that you dread: it's their finding it out after you have long

known it: you die too many times. And that's not right. Not fair. I hope I'll never have a daughter."

"That's incest," I whispered.

"I never said it wasn't. I said it was like fire. Like watching the fire lean up and away rushing."

"You must either watch a fire, or burn up in it. Or not be there at all. Which would you choose?"

"I don't know. If it was a girl, I'd rather burn up in it."

"Than to not be there at all, even?"

"Yes." Because we were young. And the young seem to be impervious to anything except trifles. We can invest trifles with a tragic profundity, which is the world. Because, after all, there's nothing particularly profound about reality.

Because when you reach reality, along about forty or fifty or sixty, you find it to be only six feet deep and eighteen feet square.

Then it was over. Outside again, the wind blew steadily down from the black hills, hollowing out the green glass bowl of the sky.

We watched them file out of the church and carry the coffin into the churchyard. Four of them carried iron lanterns and in the dusk they clotted quietly antic about the grave while the wind leaned steadily upon them and upon the lantern flames, and blew fine dust into the grave as though all nature were quick to hide it.

Then they were done. The lanterns bobbed into motion, approaching, and we watched the priest. He crossed the churchyard toward the presbytery at a scuttling gait, blown along in his gusty black. The soldier was in mufti now. He came out of the throng, striding also with that long-limbed thrust like his aunt. He looked briefly at us with his bold surly face and got on the bike and rode away. "He was one of the pallbearers," Don said. "And what do you think of that, signori?"

"No spika," I said. "I love Italy. I love Mussolini."

"You said that before."

"All right. Salut, then."

Don looked at me. His face was quite sober. "Salut," he said. Then he looked toward the presbytery, hitching his pack forward. The door of the presbytery was closed.

"Don," I said. He stopped, looking at me. The mountains had lost all perspective; they appeared to lean in toward us. It was like being at the bottom of a dead volcano filled with that lost savage green wind dead in its own motion and full of its own driving and unsleeping dust. We looked at one another.

"All right, damn it," Don said. "You say what to do next, then." We looked at one another. After a while the wind would sound like sleep, maybe. If you were warm and close between walls, maybe.

"All right," I said.

“Why can’t you mean, all right? Damn it, we’ve got to do something. This is October; it’s not summer. And we don’t know anything. We haven’t heard anything. We don’t speak Italian. We love Italy.”

“I said, all right,” I said. The presbytery was of stone too, bleak in a rank garden. We were halfway up the flagged path when a casement beneath the eaves opened and somebody in white looked down at us and closed the shutter again. It was done all in one movement. Again we said together, quietly:

“Beaver.” But it was too dark to see much, and the casement was closed again. It had not taken ten seconds.

“Only we should have said, Beaverette,” Don said.

“That’s right. Is that a joke?”

“Yes. That’s a joke.” A wooden-faced peasant woman opened the door. She held a candle, the flame leaning inward from the wind. The hall behind her was dark; a stale, chill smell came out of it. She stood there, the harsh planes of her face in sharp relief, her eyes two caverns in which two little flames glittered, looking at us.

“Go on,” I said. “Tell her something.”

“We were told that his reverence, signora,” Don said, “that we might—” The candle leaned and recovered. She raised the other hand and sheltered it, blocking the door with her body. “We are travelers, en promenade; we were told — supper and a bed . . .”

When we followed her down the hall we carried with us in our ears the long rush of the recent wind, like in a sea shell. There was no light save



the candle which she carried. So that, behind her, we walked in gloom out of which the serrated shadow of a stair on one wall reared dimly into the passing candle and dissolved in mounting serrations, carrying the eye with it up the wall where there was not any light. "Pretty soon it'll be too dark to see anything from that window," Don said.

"Maybe she won't have to, by then."

"Maybe so." The woman opened a door; we entered a lighted room. It contained a table on which sat a candle in an iron candlestick, a carafe of wine, a long loaf, a metal box with a slotted cover. The table was set for two. We slung our packs into the corner and watched her set another place and fetch another chair from the hall. But that made only three places and we watched her take up her candle and go out by a second door. Then Don looked at me. "Maybe we'll see her, after all."

"How do you know he doesn't eat?"

"When? Don't you know where he'll be?" I looked at him. "He'll have to stay out there in the garden."

"How do you know?"

"The soldier was at the church. He must have seen him. Must have heard—" We looked at the door, but it was the woman. She had three bowls. "Soup, signora?" Don said.

"Sì. Soup."

"Good. We have come far." She set the bowls on the table. "From Milano." She looked briefly over her shoulder at Don.

“You’d better have stayed there,” she said. And she went out. Don and I looked at one another. My ears were still full of wind.

“So he is in the garden,” Don said.

“How do you know he is?”

After a while Don quit looking at me. “I don’t know.”

“No. You don’t know. And I don’t know. We don’t want to know. Do we?”

“No. No spika.”

“I mean, sure enough.”

“That’s what I mean,” Don said. The whisper in our ears seemed to fill the room with wind. Then we realized that it was the wind that we heard, the wind itself we heard, even though the single window was shuttered tight. It was as though the quiet room were isolated on the ultimate peak of space, hollowed murmurous out of chaos and the long dark fury of time. It seemed strange that the candle flame should stand so steady above the wick.

III

So we did not see him until we were in the house. Until then he had been only a shabby shapeless figure, on the small size, scuttling through the blowing dusk at the head of the funeral, and a voice. It was as though neither of them was any part of the other: the figure in blowing black, and the voice beating up the still air above the candles, detached and dispassionate, tireless and spent and forlorn.

There was something precipitate about the way he entered, like a diver taking a full breath in the act of diving. He did not look at us and he was already speaking, greeting us and excusing his tardiness in one breath, in a low rapid voice. Still, without having ceased to speak or having looked at us, he motioned toward the other chairs and seated himself and bowed his head over his plate and began a Latin grace without a break in his voice; again his voice seemed to rush slow and effortless just above the sound of the wind, like in the church.

It went on for some time; so that after a while I raised my head. Don was watching me, his eyebrows arched a little; we looked toward the priest and saw his hands writhing slowly on either side of his plate. Then the woman spoke a sharp word behind me; I had not heard her enter: a gaunt woman, not tall, with a pale, mahogany-colored face that might have been any age between twenty-five and sixty.

The priest stopped. He looked at us for the first time, out of weak, rushing eyes. They were brown and irisless, like those of an old dog. Looking at us, it was as though he had driven them up with whips and held them so, in cringing and rushing desperation. "I forget," he said. "There come times—" Again the woman snapped a word at him, setting a tureen on the table, the shadow of her arm falling across his face and remaining there: but we had already looked away.

The long wind rushed past the stone eaves; the candle flame stood steady as a sharpened pencil in the still sound of the wind. We heard her filling the bowls, yet she still stood for a time, the priest's face in the shadow of her arm; she seemed to be holding us all so until the moment — whatever it was — had passed. She went out. Don and I began to eat. We did not look toward him. When he spoke at last, it was in a tone of level, polite uninterest. "You have come far, signori?"

“From Milano,” we both said.

“Before that, Firenze,” Don said. The priest’s head was bent over his bowl. He ate rapidly. Without looking up he gestured toward the loaf. I pushed it along to him. He broke the end off and went on eating.

“Ah,” he said. “Firenze. That is a city. More — what do you say? — spirituel than our Milano.” He ate hurriedly, without finesse. His robe was turned back over a flannel undershirt, the sleeves were. His spoon clattered; at once the woman entered with a platter of broccoli.

She removed the bowls. He reached his hand. She handed him the carafe and he filled the glasses without looking up and lifted his with a brief phrase. But he had only feigned to drink; he was watching my face when I looked at him. I looked away; I heard him clattering at the dish and Don was looking at me too.

Then the woman’s shoulder came between us and the priest. “There come times—” he said. He clattered at the dish. When the woman spoke to him in that shrill, rapid patois he thrust his chair back and for an instant we saw his driven eyes across her arm. “There come times—” he said, raising his voice.

Then she drowned the rest of it, getting completely between us and Don and I stopped looking and heard them leave the room. The steps ceased. Then we could hear only the wind.

“It was the burial service,” Don said. Don was a Catholic. “That grace was.”

“Yes,” I said. “I didn’t know that.”

“Yes. It was the burial service. He got mixed up.”

“Sure,” I said. “That’s it. What do we do now?” Our packs lay in the corner. Two packs can look as human, as utterly human and spent, as two shoes. We were watching the door when the woman entered. But she wasn’t going to stop. She didn’t look at us.

“What shall we do now, signora?” Don said.

“Eat.” She did not stop. Then we could hear the wind again.

“Have some wine,” Don said. He raised the carafe, then he held it poised above my glass, and we listened. The voice was beyond the wall, maybe two walls, in a sustained rush of indistinguishable words. He was not talking to anyone there: you could tell that. In whatever place he was, he was alone: you could tell that. Or maybe it was the wind.

Maybe in any natural exaggerated situation — wind, rain, drouth — man is always alone. It went on for longer than a minute while Don held the carafe above my glass. Then he poured. We began to eat. The voice was muffled and sustained, like a machine might have been making it.

“If it were just summer,” I said.

“Have some wine.” He poured. We held our poised glasses. It sounded just like a machine. You could tell that he was alone. Anybody could have. “That’s the trouble,” Don said. “Because there’s not anybody there. Not anybody in the house.”

“The woman.”

“So are we.” He looked at me.

“Oh,” I said.

“Sure. What better chance could she have wanted, have asked for? He was in here at least five minutes. And he just back from the army after three years. The first day he is home, and then afternoon and then twilight and then darkness. You saw her there. Didn’t you see her up there?”

“He locked the door. You know he locked it.”

“This house belongs to God: you can’t have a lock on it. You didn’t know that.”

“That’s right. I forgot you’re a Catholic. You know things. You know a lot, don’t you?”

“No. I don’t know anything. I no spika too. I love Italy too.” The woman entered. She didn’t bring anything this time. She came to the table and stood there, her gaunt face above the candle, looking down at us.

“Look, then,” she said. “Will you go away?”

“Go away?” Don said. “Not stop here tonight?” She looked down at us, her hand lying on the table. “Where could we stop? Who would take us in? One cannot sleep on the mountain in October, signora.”

“Yes,” she said. She was not looking at us now. Through the walls we listened to the voice and to the wind.

“What is this, anyway?” Don said. “What goes on here, signora?”

She looked at him gravely, speculatively, as if he were a child. "You are seeing the hand of God, signorino," she said. "Pray God that you are too young to remember it." Then she was gone. And after a while the voice ceased, cut short off like a thread. And then there was just the wind.

"As soon as we get out of the wind, it won't be so bad," I said.

"Have some wine." Don raised the carafe. It was less than half full.

"We'd better not drink any more."

"No." He filled the glasses. We drank. Then we stopped. It began again, abruptly, in full stride, as though silence were the thread this time. We drank. "We might as well finish the broccoli, too."

"I don't want any more."

"Have some wine then."

"You've already had more than I have."

"All right." He filled my glass. I drank it. "Now, have some wine."

"We ought not to drink it all."

He raised the carafe. "Two more glasses left. No use in leaving that."

"There aren't two glasses left."

"Bet you a lira."

"All right. But let me pour."

“All right.” He gave me the carafe. I filled my glass and reached toward his. “Listen,” he said. For about a minute now the voice had been rising and falling, like a wheel running down. This time it didn’t rise again; there was only the long sound of the wind left. “Pour it,” Don said.

I poured. The wine mounted three quarters. It began to dribble away. “Tilt it up.” I did so. A single drop hung for a moment, then fell into the glass. “Owe you a lira,” Don said.

The coins rang loud in the slotted box. When he took it up from the table and shook it, it made no sound. He took the coins from his pocket and dropped them through the slot. He shook it again. “Doesn’t sound like quite enough. Cough up.”

I dropped some coins through the slot; he shook the box again. “Sounds all right now.” He looked at me across the table, his empty glass bottom-up before him. “How about a little wine?”

When we rose I took my pack from the corner. It was on the bottom. I had to tumble Don’s aside. He watched me. “What are you going to do with that?” he said. “Take it out for a walk?”

“I don’t know,” I said. Past the cold invisible eaves the long wind steadily sighed. Upon the candle the flame stood like the balanced feather on the long white nose of a clown.

The hall was dark; there was no sound in it. There was nothing in it save the cold smell of sunless plaster and silence and the smell of living, of where people have, and will have, lived. We carried our packs low and close against our legs like we had stolen them.



We went on to the door and opened it, entering the black wind again. It had scoured the sky clear and clean, hollowing it out of the last of light, the last of twilight. We were halfway to the gate when we saw him. He was walking swiftly back and forth beside the wall. His head was bare, his robes ballooning about him. When he saw us he did not stop. He didn't hurry, either. He just turned and went back beside the wall and turned again, walking fast. We waited at the gate.

We thanked him for the food, he motionless in his whipping robes, his head bent and averted a little, as a deaf man listens. When Don knelt at his feet he started back as though Don had offered to strike him. Then I felt like a Catholic too and I knelt too and he made the sign hurriedly above us, upon the black-and-green wind and dusk, like he would have made it in water.

When we passed out the gate and looked back we could still see, against the sky and the blank and lightless house, his head rushing back and forth like a midget running along the top of the wall.

#### IV

The café was on the lee side of the street; we sat out of the wind. But we could see gusts and eddies of trash swirl along the gutter, and an occasional tongue of it licked chill across our legs, and we could hear the steady rushing of it in the high twilight among the roofs. On the curb two musicians from the hills — a fiddler and a piper — sat, playing a wild and skirling tune. Now and then they stopped to drink, then they resumed the same tune.

It was without beginning and seemingly without end, the wild unmusic of it swirling along the wind with a quality at once martial and sad. The waiter fetched us brandy and coffee, his dirty apron streaming suddenly and revealing beneath it a second one of green baize and rigid as oxidized copper.

At the other table five young men sat, drinking and ringing separately small coins onto the waiter's tray, which he appeared to count by the timbre of the concussion before tilting them into his waistcoat in one motion, and a long-flanked young peasant woman stopped to hear the music, a child riding her hip.

She set the child down and it scuttled under the table where the young men sat, they withdrawing their legs to permit it, while the woman was not looking. She was looking at the musicians, her face round and tranquil, her mouth open a little.

"Let's have some wine," Don said.

"All right," I said. "I like Italy," I said. We had another brandy. The woman was trying to cajole the child from under the table. One of the young men extracted it and gave it back to her. People stopped in the street to hear the music, and a high two-wheeled cart, full of fagots and drawn by a woman and a diminutive mule, passed without stopping, and then the girl came up the street in her white dress, and I didn't feel like a Catholic any more.

She was all in white, coatless, walking slender and supple. I didn't feel like anything any more, watching her white dress swift in the twilight, carrying her somewhere or she carrying it somewhere: anyway, it was going too, moving when she moved and because she moved, losing her

when she would be lost because it moved when she moved and went with her to the instant of loss.

I remember how, when I learned about Thaw and White and Evelyn Nesbitt, how I cried. I cried because Evelyn, who was a word, was beautiful and lost or I would never have heard of her. Because she had to be lost for me to find her and I had to find her to lose her.

And when I learned that she was old enough to have a grown daughter or son or something, I cried, because I had lost myself then and I could never again be hurt by loss. So I watched the white dress, thinking, She'll be as near me in a second as she'll ever be and then she'll go on away in her white dress forevermore, in the twilight forevermore.

Then I felt Don watching her too and then we watched the soldier spring down from the bike. They came together and stopped and for a while they stood there in the street, among the people, facing one another but not touching. Maybe they were not even talking, and it didn't matter how long; it didn't matter about time. Then Don was nudging me.

"The other table," he said. The five young men had all turned; their heads were together, now and then a hand, an arm, secret, gesticulant, their faces all one way. They leaned back, without turning their faces, and the waiter stood, tray on hip — a squat, sardonic figure older than Grandfather Lust himself — looking also.

At last they turned and went on up the street together in the direction from which he had come, he leading the bicycle. Just before they passed from sight they stopped and faced one another again among

the people, the heads, without touching at all. Then they went on.  
“Let’s have some wine,” Don said.

The waiter set the brandies on the table, his apron like a momentary board on the wind. “You have military in town,” Don said.

“That’s right,” the waiter said. “One.”

“Well, one is enough,” Don said. The waiter looked up the street. But they were gone now, with her white dress shaping her stride, her girl-white, not for us.

“Too many, some say.” He looked much more like a monk than the priest did, with his long thin nose and his bald head. He looked like a devastated hawk. “You’re stopping at the priest’s, eh?”

“You have no hotel,” Don said.

The waiter made change from his waistcoat, ringing the coins deliberately upon the table. “What for? Who would stop here, without he walked? Nobody walks except you English.”

“We’re Americans.”

“Well.” He raised his shoulders faintly. “That’s your affair.” He was not looking at us exactly; not at Don, that is. “Did you try Cavalcanti’s?”

“A wineshop at the edge of town? The soldier’s aunt, isn’t it? Yes. But she said—”

The waiter was watching him now. “She didn’t send you to the priest?”

“No.”

“Ah,” the waiter said. His apron streamed suddenly. He fought it down and scoured the top of the table with it. “Americans, eh?”

“Yes,” Don said. “Why wouldn’t she tell us where to go?”

The waiter scoured the table. “That Cavalcanti. She’s not of this parish.”

“Not?”

“Not since three years. The padrone belongs to that one beyond the mountain.” He named a village which we had passed in the forenoon.

“I see,” Don said. “They aren’t natives.”

“Oh, they were born here. Until three years ago they belonged to this parish.”

“But three years ago they changed.”

“They changed.” He found another spot on the table. He removed it with the apron. Then he examined the apron. “There are changes and changes; some further than others.”

“The padrona changed further than across the mountain, did she?”

“The padrona belongs to no parish at all.” He looked at us. “Like me.”

“Like you?”

“Did you try to talk to her about the church?” He watched Don. “Stop there tomorrow and mention the church to her.”

“And that happened three years ago,” Don said. “That was a year of changes for them.”

“You said it. The nephew to the army, the padrone across the mountain, the padrona . . . All in one week, too. Stop there tomorrow and ask her.”

“What do they think here about all these changes?”

“What changes?”

“These recent changes.”

“How recent?” He looked at Don. “There’s no law against changes.”

“No. Not when they’re done like the law says. Sometimes the law has a look, just to see if they were changed right. Isn’t that so?”

The waiter had assumed an attitude of sloven negligence, save his eyes, his long face. It was too big for him, his face was. “How did you know he was a policeman?”

“Policeman?”

“You said soldier; I knew you meant policeman and just didn’t speak the language good. But you’ll pick it up with practice.” He looked at Don. “So you made him too, did you? Came in here this afternoon; said he was a shoe-drummer. But I made him.”

“Here already,” Don said. “I wonder why he didn’t stop the . . . before they . . .”

“How do you know he’s a policeman?” I said.

The waiter looked at me. “I don’t care whether he is or not, buddy. Which had you rather do? think a man is a cop and find he’s not, or think he’s not a cop, and find he is?”

“You’re right,” Don said. “So that’s what they say here.”

“They say plenty. Always have and always will. Like any other town.”

“What do you say?” Don said.

“I don’t say. You don’t either.”

“No.”

“It’s no skin off of my back. If they want to drink, I serve them; if they want to talk, I listen. That keeps me as busy as I want to be all day.”

“You’re right,” Don said. “It didn’t happen to you.”

The waiter looked up the street; it was almost full dark. He appeared not to have heard. “Who sent for the cop, I wonder?” Don said.

“When a man’s got jack, he’ll find plenty of folks to help him make trouble for folks even after he’s dead,” the waiter said. Then he looked at us. “I?” he said. He leaned; he slapped his chest lightly.

He looked quickly at the other table, then he leaned down and hissed: “I am atheist, like in America,” and stood back and looked at us. “In America, all are atheists. We know.” He stood there in his dirty apron, with his long, weary, dissolute face while we rose in turn and shook hands with him gravely, the five young men turning to look.

He flipped his other hand at us, low against his flank. “Rest, rest,” he hissed. He looked over his shoulder at the young men. “Sit down,” he whispered. He jerked his head toward the doorway behind us, where the padrona sat behind the bar. “I’ve got to eat, see?”

He scuttled away and returned with two more brandies, carrying them with his former sloven, precarious skill, as if he had passed no word with us save to take the order. "It's on me," he said. "Put it down."

"Now, what?" Don said. The music had ceased; from across the street we watched the fiddler, fiddle under arm, standing before the table where the young men sat, his other hand and the clutched hat gesticulant. The young woman was already going up the street, the child riding her hip again, its head nodding to a somnolent rhythm, like a man on an elephant. "Now, what?"

"I don't care."

"Oh, come on."

"No."

"There's no detective here. He never saw one. He wouldn't know a detective. There aren't any detectives in Italy: can you imagine an official Italian in plain clothes for a uniform?"

"No."

"She'll show us where the bed is, and in the morning early—"

"No. You can, if you want to. But I'm not."

He looked at me. Then he swung his pack onto his shoulder. "Good night. See you in the morning. At the café yonder."

"All right." He did not look back. Then he turned the corner. I stood in the wind. Anyway, I had the coat. It was a shooting coat of Harris



tweed; we had paid eleven guineas for it, wearing it day about while the other wore the sweater.

In the Tyrol last summer Don held us up three days while he was trying to make the girl who sold beer at the inn. He wore the coat for three successive days, swapping me a week, to be paid on demand.

On the third day the girl's sweetheart came back. He was as big as a silo, with a green feather in his hat. We watched him pick her over the bar with one hand. I believe she could have done Don the same way: all yellow and pink and white she was, like a big orchard.

Or like looking out across a snowfield in the early sunlight. She could have done it at almost any hour for three days too, by just reaching out her hand. Don gained four pounds while we were there.

V

Then I came into the full sweep of the wind. The houses were all dark, yet there was still a little light low on the ground, as though the wind held it there flattened to the earth and it had been unable to rise and escape. The walls ceased at the beginning of the bridge; the river looked like steel.

I thought I had already come into the full sweep of the wind, but I hadn't. The bridge was of stone, balustrades and roadway and all, and I squatted beneath the lee of the weather rail. I could hear the wind above and beneath, coming down the river in a long sweeping hum, like through wires. I squatted there, waiting. It wasn't very long.

He didn't see me at first, until I rose. "Did you think to have the flask filled?" he said.

"I forgot. I intended to. Damn the luck. Let's go back—"

"I got a bottle. Which way now?"

"I don't care. Out of the wind. I don't care." We crossed the bridge. Our feet made no sound on the stones, because the wind blew it away. It flattened the water, scoured it; it looked just like steel.

It had a sheen, holding light like the land between it and the wind, reflecting enough to see by. But it swept all sound away before it was made almost, so that when we reached the other side and entered the cut where the road began to mount, it was several moments before we could hear anything except our ears; then we heard. It was a smothered whimpering sound that seemed to come out of the air overhead. We stopped. "It's a child," Don said. "A baby."

"No: an animal. An animal of some sort." We looked at one another in the pale darkness, listening.

"It's up there, anyway," Don said. We climbed up out of the cut. There was a low stone wall enclosing a field, the field a little luminous yet, dissolving into the darkness. Just this side of the darkness, about a hundred yards away, a copse stood black, blobbed shapeless on the gloom.

The wind rushed up across the field and we leaned on the wall, listening into it, looking at the copse. But the sound was nearer than that, and after a moment we saw the priest.

He was lying on his face just inside the wall, his robes over his head, the black blur of his gown moving faintly and steadily, either because of the wind or because he was moving under them. And whatever the sound meant that he was making, it was not meant to be listened to, for his voice ceased when we made a noise. But he didn't look up, and the faint shuddering of his gown didn't stop.

Shuddering, writhing, twisting from side to side — something. Then Don touched me. We went on beside the wall. "Get down easier here," he said quietly. The pale road rose gradually beneath us as the hill flattened. The copse was a black blob. "Only I didn't see the bicycle."

"Then go back to Cavalcanti's," I said. "Where in hell do you expect to see it?"

"They would have hidden it. I forgot. Of course they would have hidden it."

"Go on," I said. "Don't talk so goddamn much."

"Unless they thought he would be busy with us and wouldn't—" he ceased and stopped. I jolted into him and then I saw it too, the handlebars rising from beyond the wall like the horns of a hidden antelope.

Against the gloom the blob of the copse seemed to pulse and fade, as though it breathed, lived. For we were young, and night, darkness, is terrible to young people, even icy driving blackness like this. Young

people should be so constituted that with sunset they would enter a coma state, by slumber shut safe from the darkness, the secret nostalgic sense of frustration and of objectless and unappeasable desire.

“Get down, damn you,” I said. With his high hunched pack, his tight sweater, he was ludicrous; he looked like a clown; he was terrible and ugly and sad all at once, since he was ludicrous and, without the coat, he would be so cold. And so was I: ugly and terrible and sad. “This damn wind.

This damn wind.” We regained the road. We were sheltered for the moment, and he took out the bottle and we drank. It was fiery stuff. “Talk about my Milan brandy,” I said. “That damn wind. That damn wind. That damn wind.”

“Give me a cigarette.”

“You’ve got them.”

“I gave them to you.”

“You’re a goddamn liar. You didn’t.” He found them in his pocket. But I didn’t wait.

“Don’t you want one? Better light it here, while we are . . .” I didn’t wait. The road rose, became flush with the field. After a while I heard him just behind me, and we entered the wind. I could see past my shoulder his cigarette shredding away in fiery streamers upon the unimpeded rush of the mistral, that black chill wind full of dust like sparks of ice.

The End