

The Choice

NUTRIMENTI

Tuesday 13th June 1944

By the next morning the storm had passed, but the boats had not gone out and the fisherman had all gathered in the piazza struggling to arrange the nets that were still getting caught in the wind. They were all shouting with uneasy and sceptic voices. Those who had claimed to have seen them amongst the olive trees waved their arms around trying to be heard in the crowd that had grown around them. There were three of them, each telling stories that all sounded similar but weren't, while at the side of the crowd even some women had appeared and children playing football in the corner of the piazza where it meets the road. The old man Astorre's bastard dog, who came from one of the Count's runaway German Shepherds, was chasing insects who flew around idly on the priest's jetty.

All the other men, Don, the women and the children were still hidden away in their homes, as was normal for that time of day.

'I'm sure I saw some of the boys from the castle,' said a man who about sixty years old who seemed out of breath and had to wipe his face with his sleeves every few seconds. He was missing a tooth and was wearing a dark waistcoat over his old, worn shirt.

'They were walking effortlessly on the path as though it was the easiest road in the world to travel up; it looked almost as if their shoes were carrying them up it! They climbed in silence, avoiding the ditches and one of them had a shotgun in his hand, the same one I saw with it weeks ago! They passed right in front of me and I definitely recognised the one from Borghetto, the really skinny one with his hair in his eyes.'

There was a relatively large group listening to him and every so often they would nudge one another to leave. Any who tried to interrupt the man in the waistcoat, was made to be quiet by an authoritative gesture of his hand. 'No I assure it was them!' he continued. 'When I saw them moving like that I thought to follow them to see what they were up to. After all they'd been gone for a while, what business did they have coming back here to the island? I knew it had something to do with the others in the castle and in fact I was right!'

He had followed them and hidden behind an oak tree waiting to see them leave the castle through the small gate through which they had just entered with a key. After about twenty minutes they came out again with a few others.

'But how do you know it was really them?' Someone from the crowd asked.

'Well who else could it have been?'

There was no one else we knew of in the castle. The confusion of the last few months had been great but it seemed for a while now, particularly since they fled, that everything had gone back to normal. And the comings and goings from the mainland to the island had regained their normal routine punctuated by the basic needs that have never changed for those living there and now also by the new needs of the new people in the castle.

'And what if it had been Cenci and his family? The old man is handicapped, you would have recognised him.'

The old fisherman shook his head with an air of pride. 'The old man was not there and there were at least three women there.'

'Cenci has two girls,' said another member of the crowd.

'Exactly,' said the fisherman.

'Why only four or five of them? He will have paid them don't think?'

'I do not know,' he said, stepping back and rubbing his mouth. 'I only know as they climbed back down some guards had to help some of the women who could have gone flying at any moment. There was hardly any light; it had begun to rain, and the wind. It was like a wolf howling.'

The wind had still not subsided, and the fisherman kept having to leave their posts to go and catch nets that had blown away and return them to their spot. The sky was beginning to fill with cracks though as the clouds began to disperse leaving small patches of bright blue and the sun's morning rays to shine down onto the piazza.

'But,' the most sceptical in the crowd spoke again, 'I do not understand how you can be sure they were the guards. They believe differently,' and he pointed to the other two men just behind him.

'I am sure that they were them in the same way that you are you.' The fisherman replied instantly. 'So if I'm wrong tell me right away as it will mean that I'll be wrong again tonight.'

The men chuckled but the old man had his reasons to believe what he saw.

On the other side of the piazza about ten metres from the shore, a young man of not even twenty years old was describing a different account to an even larger crowd of people. The manner in which he told the story was the same but he had a different theory behind the identity of the troops seen. He did not believe they were guards but rather partisans from Sanfatuocchio.

'I know them,' he explained. 'They helped my father and I take the olives to the small farms in Chiusi last year. I saw them again two months ago and they told me they had joined the partisans and I believe because when I first saw them all they could do was curse Mussolini and the Germans. That was even before the truce so before July.'

Someone having heard 'Il Duce's' name being tarnished murmured for a moment but stopped quickly. The blacks had come to the island and there were more arriving because of the war being so near. Those strange tactics were all to present a common and united front. For now only the story mattered and it was necessary to listen to it. The night before someone else had recognised them moored up amongst a dozen men on the west coast of the island and had watched them climb up to the castle.

‘Well what were you doing up there?’ Someone asked him.

‘I was doing what we do every time we do something at night, fools. I was giving some money to my father.’

The two men had a small plot of land full of vegetable patches and greens, and they had also built a mud hut where they spent almost all their free time when they weren’t fishing. Sometimes they even slept there when the lake prevented the boats to go out, more out of loneliness than necessity.

The last version of the story that we heard came from a dark skinned man with big eyes and muscles. He occupied the centre of the square, but he spoke without emphasis, as if he did not particularly care if the other believed him. He reported what he had seen, or rather what he had believed to have seen, and he made no effort to convince anyone.

‘There were the partisans and then there were others.’ He started. ‘There are the partisans of Sanfatuocchio because I know the man they say is the boss and a few lieutenants and they were there last night. There was definitely a guard there too because he was still in uniform, the skinny one with the long hair, I would know him anywhere. For some reason they’d got together and had left the shore before the heavens opened, but it had calmed down by the time they arrived on the island. Some climbed up the hill, as if to measure out the space and plan the escape routes, and the others being led by the guards, entered the castle with their keys. They then returned to the shore with the others and they had some women with them, three or four. They stayed behind them until they got to the bottom to the boats near St. Francis’ rocks.

I didn’t have the heart to watch them set sail into the night with the wind blowing a heavy gale. I thought of the Germans and tried to say a prayer to them.’ The men listened, and commented, and gambled. Someone wanted to try to get them to agree with each other, but most people had already started to take sides. Two women moved towards the last group, and had been following the story clutching handkerchiefs. One was the wife of the man who was speaking and the other was her sister. The children remained playing in the corner of the piazza and hadn’t paid any attention to the adults. They had even got Astorre’s dog to play fetch. Don then arrived greeting everyone as he headed for the jetty that he had built himself with the help of those who had begged him for work so they could feed their children.

They had not managed to escape what the other people in the piazza had. Those who were still intent on siding with one of the three speakers who were still chanting their tales. The four Germans on board the boat raised their arms high and straight shouting ‘HEIL HITLER’ and continued to organise their oars and mooring. Don stopped in the middle of the jetty, he nodded goodbye and turned away again. It was not meant as a welcoming signal but rather a warning to remind them that God had not yet turned his back on the island.