

CHAPTER XV

THE PLACE CALLED CALIFANO

There is no mistake about it, Alvina was a lost girl. She was cut off from everything she belonged to. Ovid isolated in Thrace might well lament. The soul itself needs its own mysterious nourishment. This nourishment lacking, nothing is well.

At Pescocalascio it was the mysterious influence of the mountains and valleys themselves which seemed always to be annihilating the Englishwoman: nay, not only her, but the very natives themselves. Ciccio and Pancrazio clung to her, essentially, as if she saved them also from extinction. It needed all her courage. Truly, she had to support the souls of the two men.

At first she did not realize. She was only stunned with the strangeness of it all: startled, half-enraptured with the terrific beauty of the place, half-horrified by its savage annihilation of her. But she was stunned. The days went by.

It seems there are places which resist us, which have the power to overthrow our psychic being. It seems as if every country has its potent negative centres, localities which savagely and triumphantly refuse our living culture. And Alvina had struck one of them, here

on the edge of the Abruzzi.

She was not in the village of Pescocalascio itself. That was a long hour's walk away. Pancrazio's house was the chief of a tiny hamlet of three houses, called Califano because the Califanos had made it. There was the ancient, savage hole of a house, quite windowless, where Pancrazio and Ciccio's mother had been born: the family home. Then there was Pancrazio's villa. And then, a little below, another newish, modern house in a sort of wild meadow, inhabited by the peasants who worked the land. Ten minutes' walk away was another cluster of seven or eight houses, where Giovanni lived. But there was no shop, no post nearer than Pescocalascio, an hour's heavy road up deep and rocky, wearying tracks.

And yet, what could be more lovely than the sunny days: pure, hot, blue days among the mountain foothills: irregular, steep little hills half wild with twiggy brown oak-trees and marshes and broom heaths, half cultivated, in a wild, scattered fashion. Lovely, in the lost hollows beyond a marsh, to see Ciccio slowly ploughing with two great white oxen: lovely to go with Pancrazio down to the wild scrub that bordered the river-bed, then over the white-bouldered, massive desert and across stream to the other scrubby savage shore, and so up to the high-road. Pancrazio was very happy if Alvina would accompany him. He liked it that she was not afraid. And her sense of the beauty of the place was an infinite relief to him.

Nothing could have been more marvellous than the winter twilight. Sometimes Alvina and Pancrazio were late returning with the ass. And then gingerly the ass would step down the steep banks, already beginning to freeze when the sun went down. And again and again he would balk the stream, while a violet-blue dusk descended on the white, wide stream-bed, and the scrub and lower hills became dark, and in heaven, oh, almost unbearably lovely, the snow of the near mountains was burning rose, against the dark-blue heavens. How unspeakably lovely it was, no one could ever tell, the grand, pagan twilight of the valleys, savage, cold, with a sense of ancient gods who knew the right for human sacrifice. It stole away the soul of Alvina. She felt transfigured in it, clairvoyant in another mystery of life. A savage hardness came in her heart. The gods who had demanded human sacrifice were quite right, immutably right. The fierce, savage gods who dipped their lips in blood, these were the true gods.

The terror, the agony, the nostalgia of the heathen past was a constant torture to her mediumistic soul. She did not know what it was. But it was a kind of neuralgia in the very soul, never to be located in the human body, and yet physical. Coming over the brow of a heathy, rocky hillock, and seeing Ciccio beyond leaning deep over the plough, in his white shirt-sleeves following the slow, waving, moth-pale oxen across a small track of land turned up in the heathen hollow, her soul would go all faint, she would almost swoon with realization of the world that had gone before. And Ciccio was so

silent, there seemed so much dumb magic and anguish in him, as if he were for ever afraid of himself and the thing he was. He seemed, in his silence, to concentrate upon her so terribly. She believed she would not live.

Sometimes she would go gathering acorns, large, fine acorns, a precious crop in that land where the fat pig was almost an object of veneration. Silently she would crouch filling the pannier. And far off she would hear the sound of Giovanni chopping wood, of Ciccio calling to the oxen or Pancrazio making noises to the ass, or the sound of a peasant's mattock. Over all the constant speech of the passing river, and the real breathing presence of the upper snows. And a wild, terrible happiness would take hold of her, beyond despair, but very like despair. No one would ever find her. She had gone beyond the world into the pre-world, she had reopened on the old eternity.

And then Maria, the little elvish old wife of Giovanni, would come up with the cows. One cow she held by a rope round its horns, and she hauled it from the patches of young corn into the rough grass, from the little plantation of trees in among the heath. Maria wore the full-pleated white-sleeved dress of the peasants, and a red kerchief on her head. But her dress was dirty, and her face was dirty, and the big gold rings of her ears hung from ears which perhaps had never been washed. She was rather smoke-dried too, from perpetual wood-smoke.

Maria in her red kerchief hauling the white cow, and screaming at it, would come laughing towards Alvina, who was rather afraid of cows. And then, screaming high in dialect, Maria would talk to her. Alvina smiled and tried to understand. Impossible. It was not strictly a human speech. It was rather like the crying of half-articulate animals. It certainly was not Italian. And yet Alvina by dint of constant hearing began to pick up the coagulated phrases.

She liked Maria. She liked them all. They were all very kind to her, as far as they knew. But they did not know. And they were kind with each other. For they all seemed lost, like lost, forlorn aborigines, and they treated Alvina as if she were a higher being. They loved her that she would strip maize-cobs or pick acorns. But they were all anxious to serve her. And it seemed as if they needed some one to serve. It seemed as if Alvina, the Englishwoman, had a certain magic glamour for them, and so long as she was happy, it was a supreme joy and relief to them to have her there. But it seemed to her she would not live.

And when she was unhappy! Ah, the dreadful days of cold rain mingled with sleet, when the world outside was more than impossible, and the house inside was a horror. The natives kept themselves alive by going about constantly working, dumb and elemental. But what was Alvina to do?

For the house was unspeakable. The only two habitable rooms were the kitchen and Alvina's bedroom: and the kitchen, with its little grated windows high up in the wall, one of which had a broken pane and must keep one-half of its shutters closed, was like a dark cavern vaulted and bitter with wood-smoke. Seated on the settle before the fire, the hard, greasy settle, Alvina could indeed keep the fire going, with faggots of green oak. But the smoke hurt her chest, she was not clean for one moment, and she could do nothing else. The bedroom again was just impossibly cold. And there was no other place. And from far away came the wild braying of an ass, primeval and desperate in the snow.

The house was quite large; but uninhabitable. Downstairs, on the left of the wide passage where the ass occasionally stood out of the weather, and where the chickens wandered in search of treasure, was a big, long apartment where Pancrazio kept implements and tools and potatoes and pumpkins, and where four or five rabbits hopped unexpectedly out of the shadows. Opposite this, on the right, was the cantina, a dark place with wine-barrels and more agricultural stores. This was the whole of the downstairs.

Going upstairs, half way up, at the turn of the stairs was the opening of a sort of barn, a great wire-netting behind which showed a glow of orange maize-cobs and some wheat. Upstairs were four rooms. But Alvina's room alone was furnished. Pancrazio slept in the

unfurnished bedroom opposite, on a pile of old clothes. Beyond was a room with litter in it, a chest of drawers, and rubbish of old books and photographs Pancrazio had brought from England. There was a battered photograph of Lord Leighton, among others. The fourth room, approached through the corn-chamber, was always locked.

Outside was just as hopeless. There had been a little garden within the stone enclosure. But fowls, geese, and the ass had made an end of this. Fowl-droppings were everywhere, indoors and out, the ass left his pile of droppings to steam in the winter air on the threshold, while his heartrending bray rent the air. Roads there were none: only deep tracks, like profound ruts with rocks in them, in the hollows, and rocky, grooved tracks over the brows. The hollow grooves were full of mud and water, and one struggled slipperily from rock to rock, or along narrow grass-ledges.

What was to be done, then, on mornings that were dark with sleet? Pancrazio would bring a kettle of hot water at about half-past eight. For had he not travelled Europe with English gentlemen, as a sort of model-valet! Had he not loved his English gentlemen? Even now, he was infinitely happier performing these little attentions for Alvina than attending to his wretched domains.

Ciccio rose early, and went about in the hap-hazard, useless way of Italians all day long, getting nothing done. Alvina came out of the icy bedroom to the black kitchen. Pancrazio would be gallantly

heating milk for her, at the end of a long stick. So she would sit on the settle and drink her coffee and milk, into which she dipped her dry bread. Then the day was before her.

She washed her cup and her enamelled plate, and she tried to clean the kitchen. But Pancrazio had on the fire a great black pot, dangling from the chain. He was boiling food for the eternal pig--the only creature for which any cooking was done. Ciccio was tramping in with faggots. Pancrazio went in and out, back and forth from his pot.

Alvina stroked her brow and decided on a method. Once she was rid of Pancrazio, she would wash every cup and plate and utensil in boiling water. Well, at last Pancrazio went off with his great black pan, and she set to. But there were not six pieces of crockery in the house, and not more than six cooking utensils. These were soon scrubbed. Then she scrubbed the two little tables and the shelves. She lined the food-chest with clean paper. She washed the high window-ledges and the narrow mantel-piece, that had large mounds of dusty candle-wax, in deposits. Then she tackled the settle. She scrubbed it also. Then she looked at the floor. And even she, English housewife as she was, realized the futility of trying to wash it. As well try to wash the earth itself outside. It was just a piece of stone-laid earth. She swept it as well as she could, and made a little order in the faggot-heap in the corner. Then she washed the little, high-up windows, to try and let in light.

And what was the difference? A dank wet soapy smell, and not much more. Maria had kept scuffling admiringly in and out, crying her wonderment and approval. She had most ostentatiously chased out an obtrusive hen, from this temple of cleanliness. And that was all.

It was hopeless. The same black walls, the same floor, the same cold from behind, the same green-oak wood-smoke, the same bucket of water from the well--the same come-and-go of aimless busy men, the same cackle of wet hens, the same hopeless nothingness.

Alvina stood up against it for a time. And then she caught a bad cold, and was wretched. Probably it was the wood-smoke. But her chest was raw, she felt weak and miserable. She could not sit in her bedroom, for it was too cold. If she sat in the darkness of the kitchen she was hurt with smoke, and perpetually cold behind her neck. And Pancrazio rather resented the amount of faggots consumed for nothing. The only hope would have been in work. But there was nothing in that house to be done. How could she even sew?

She was to prepare the mid-day and evening meals. But with no pots, and over a smoking wood fire, what could she prepare? Black and greasy, she boiled potatoes and fried meat in lard, in a long-handled frying pan. Then Pancrazio decreed that Maria should prepare macaroni with the tomato sauce, and thick vegetable soup, and sometimes polenta. This coarse, heavy food was wearying beyond

words.

Alvina began to feel she would die, in the awful comfortless meaninglessness of it all. True, sunny days returned and some magic. But she was weak and feverish with her cold, which would not get better. So that even in the sunshine the crude comfortlessness and inferior savagery of the place only repelled her.

The others were depressed when she was unhappy.

"Do you wish you were back in England?" Ciccio asked her, with a little sardonic bitterness in his voice. She looked at him without answering. He ducked and went away.

"We will make a fire-place in the other bedroom," said Pancrazio.

No sooner said than done. Ciccio persuaded Alvina to stay in bed a few days. She was thankful to take refuge. Then she heard a rare come-and-go. Pancrazio, Ciccio, Giovanni, Maria and a mason all set about the fire-place. Up and down stairs they went, Maria carrying stone and lime on her head, and swerving in Alvina's doorway, with her burden perched aloft, to shout a few unintelligible words. In the intervals of lime-carrying she brought the invalid her soup or her coffee or her hot milk.

It turned out quite a good job--a pleasant room with two windows,

that would have all the sun in the afternoon, and would see the mountains on one hand, the far-off village perched up on the other. When she was well enough they set off one early Monday morning to the market in Ossona. They left the house by starlight, but dawn was coming by the time they reached the river. At the high-road, Pancrazio harnessed the ass, and after endless delay they jogged off to Ossona. The dawning mountains were wonderful, dim-green and mauve and rose, the ground rang with frost. Along the roads many peasants were trooping to market, women in their best dresses, some of thick heavy silk with the white, full-sleeved bodices, dresses green, lavender, dark-red, with gay kerchiefs on the head: men muffled in cloaks, treading silently in their pointed skin sandals: asses with loads, carts full of peasants, a belated cow.

The market was lovely, there in the crown of the pass, in the old town, on the frosty sunny morning. Bulls, cows, sheep, pigs, goats stood and lay about under the bare little trees on the platform high over the valley: some one had kindled a great fire of brush-wood, and men crowded round, out of the blue frost. From laden asses vegetables were unloaded, from little carts all kinds of things, boots, pots, tin-ware, hats, sweet-things, and heaps of corn and beans and seeds. By eight o'clock in the December morning the market was in full swing: a great crowd of handsome mountain people, all peasants, nearly all in costume, with different head-dresses.

Ciccio and Pancrazio and Alvina went quietly about. They bought pots

and pans and vegetables and sweet-things and thick rush matting and two wooden arm-chairs and one old soft arm-chair, going quietly and bargaining modestly among the crowd, as Anglicized Italians do.

The sun came on to the market at about nine o'clock, and then, from the terrace of the town gate, Alvina looked down on the wonderful sight of all the coloured dresses of the peasant women, the black hats of the men, the heaps of goods, the squealing pigs, the pale lovely cattle, the many tethered asses--and she wondered if she would die before she became one with it altogether. It was impossible for her to become one with it altogether. Ciccio would have to take her to England again, or to America. He was always hinting at America.

But then, Italy might enter the war. Even here it was the great theme of conversation. She looked down on the seethe of the market. The sun was warm on her. Ciccio and Pancrazio were bargaining for two cowskin rugs: she saw Ciccio standing with his head rather forward. Her husband! She felt her heart die away within her.

All those other peasant women, did they feel as she did?--the same sort of acquiescent passion, the same lapse of life? She believed they did. The same helpless passion for the man, the same remoteness from the world's actuality? Probably, under all their tension of money and money-grubbing and vindictive mountain morality and rather horrible religion, probably they felt the same. She was one with

them. But she could never endure it for a life-time. It was only a test on her. Ciccio must take her to America, or England--to America preferably.

And even as he turned to look for her, she felt a strange thrilling in her bowels: a sort of trill strangely within her, yet extraneous to her. She caught her hand to her flank. And Ciccio was looking up for her from the market beneath, searching with that quick, hasty look. He caught sight of her. She seemed to glow with a delicate light for him, there beyond all the women. He came straight towards her, smiling his slow, enigmatic smile. He could not bear it if he lost her. She knew how he loved her--almost inhumanly, elementally, without communication. And she stood with her hand to her side, her face frightened. She hardly noticed him. It seemed to her she was with child. And yet in the whole market-place she was aware of nothing but him.

"We have bought the skins," he said. "Twenty-seven lire each."

She looked at him, his dark skin, his golden eyes--so near to her, so unified with her, yet so incommunicably remote. How far off was his being from hers!

"I believe I'm going to have a child," she said.

"Eh?" he ejaculated quickly. But he had understood. His eyes shone

weirdly on her. She felt the strange terror and loveliness of his passion. And she wished she could lie down there by that town gate, in the sun, and swoon for ever unconscious. Living was almost too great a demand on her. His yellow, luminous eyes watched her and enveloped her. There was nothing for her but to yield, yield, yield. And yet she could not sink to earth.

She saw Pancrazio carrying the skins to the little cart, which was tilted up under a small, pale-stemmed tree on the platform above the valley. Then she saw him making his way quickly back through the crowd, to rejoin them.

"Did you feel something?" said Ciccio.

"Yes--here--!" she said, pressing her hand on her side as the sensation trilled once more upon her consciousness. She looked at him with remote, frightened eyes.

"That's good--" he said, his eyes full of a triumphant, incommunicable meaning.

"Well!--And now," said Pancrazio, coming up, "shall we go and eat something?"

They jogged home in the little flat cart in the wintry afternoon. It was almost night before they had got the ass untackled from the

shafts, at the wild lonely house where Pancrazio left the cart. Giovanni was there with the lantern. Ciccio went on ahead with Alvina, whilst the others stood to load up the ass by the high-way.

Ciccio watched Alvina carefully. When they were over the river, and among the dark scrub, he took her in his arms and kissed her with long, terrible passion. She saw the snow-ridges flare with evening, beyond his cheek. They had glowed dawn as she crossed the river outwards, they were white-fiery now in the dusk sky as she returned. What strange valley of shadow was she threading? What was the terrible man's passion that haunted her like a dark angel? Why was she so much beyond herself?