

La bocca del lupo

Capitolo 16

Il Colonnello Monetta accoglie il Maggiore George Robertson a Free Italy. Monetta ha fatto parte della Cavalleria Reale Sarda e sarà il collegamento ufficiale con le brigate partigiane. Robertson è contento della situazione e presenta il Caporale Watson, operatore senza fili (telegrafo) e guardia del corpo.

La località dell'incontro è Malesco, che verrà raggiunta in camion. A destinazione George viene presentato a Superbi, capo dei socialisti, grasso e allegro, non come Arca e Didio, delle Bande Reali e Fiamme Verdi. Loro sono giovani, ex ufficiali dell'esercito, politica poca, ma vogliono liberare l'Italia dai tedeschi. Dovrebbe esserci anche il Comunista Moscatelli, che però è assente. L'incontro comincia, si brinda all'alleanza e si organizza un attacco per l'indomani. All'inizio i tedeschi non rispondono, poi sparano pure loro. La battaglia continua per circa 15 minuti, 2 perdite italiane, poi i tedeschi si arrendono, preoccupati di essere uccisi. Superbi dice a Paterson che gli prenderanno l'equipaggiamento e li manderanno oltre il confine svizzero. George ritorna a Malesco. Durante le settimane successive i partigiani continuano ad attaccare e vincere i tedeschi nella Valle del Toce. Paterson è sorpreso che i partigiani continuano a vincere e che i tedeschi si arrendono. I partigiani continuano ad avanzare, anche se lentamente, George fa visita ogni tanto ed è sorpreso della forza che hanno. Tra Superbi, uomo di politica ma non soldato, e Moscatelli, soldato e politico che è stato con i russi, è disorganizzato ed imprevedibile, c'è diffidenza.

Durante la seconda metà di settembre, viene effettuata una marcia verso Domodossola, dove ci sono 200 tedeschi ma i partigiani arrivano carichi dalle piccole vittorie avute recentemente. Anche qui, i tedeschi si arrendono facilmente. Ci sono anche 60 ucraini che vogliono unirsi ai partigiani, e vengono accettati nel gruppo. Sono convinti della vittoria quindi ora possono riposarsi, il resto della nazione è responsabilità di altri. Paterson non è contento di ciò, ma è solo un osservatore e deve stare in silenzio. Tra i vari gruppetti ci sono ostilità e Paterson rimane perplesso anche da come si sono sistemati. Arriva un rappresentante per organizzare un concilio con metà partigiani e metà civili. Arca trova una armata nemica, ma vince. Ci sono però problemi nel governo di Domodossola: cibo, soldi, inimicizie. George comunica al rappresentante che andrà a Locarno per meglio organizzare la situazione. Monetta lo carica su un camion fino a Malesco, da qui a piedi e poi in treno. Giunge a destinazione in Svizzera, e con un taxi raggiunge l'Hotel Sole, dove soggiornerà durante la sua permanenza. Al bar riconosce il luogotenente che un mese fa lo aveva scortato al confine. Cerca di nascondersi, ma viene riconosciuto. Riesce a cavarsela e poi va a telefonare a Birback, che gli fa i complimenti e gli dice che entro l'indomani sarà organizzato quanto richiesto. Si accordano per vedersi la sera. Poi lui va a chiamare la sua fidanzata Karen.

Capitolo 17

Birback è in una stanza, insieme con un altro uomo che viene presentato come Carlo, che conosce bene la frontiera. Birback consegna a George un foglio con gli orari dei lanci e 20 milioni di lire. George protesta dicendo che sono troppi soldi, ma Birback lo calma e lo accompagna alla stazione. Il viaggio di ritorno prosegue senza problemi fino alla frontiera, Carlo ha già fatto quel percorso molte volte. Improvvisamente però appare un uomo dall'ombra degli alberi, un uomo che impone loro di fermarsi. C'è anche un uomo armato, si avvicina a George, e lui riconosce l'uniforme dell'esercito Svizzero. Carlo dice che l'uomo sbucato dall'ombra è un profugo italiano che va accompagnato a Malesco, dove sua moglie sta morendo. La guardia svizzera li lascia passare. Raggiunto Malesco prima dell'alba, George incita Monetta all'azione, dicendogli che ha i 20 milioni da portare a Domodossola. Monetta è così contento che vorrebbe abbracciarlo. Addirittura Moscatelli pensa che con quella somma sarà possibile organizzare un governo. Le Fiamme Verdi devono ricevere la prima consegna entro 3 giorni, e fino ad allora, George, Arca e altri circa 12 dei suoi uomini parcheggiano due camion in una piatta zona collinare a nord di Domodossola. Durante la notte fa molto freddo, si vedono le scie dei razzi di ricerca e si sentono degli spari lontani, provenienti da sud. George si lamenta per la perdita di sonno e verso le 4 del mattino dice ad Arca che qualcosa deve essere andata storta. Arca lo tranquillizza dicendo che avrebbero riprovato tre notti dopo.

Moscatelli è uno dei pochi ad aver capito la situazione. Informa quindi George di voler riportare indietro la sua formazione, così da fermare l'offensiva, e il caso di fallimento sarebbe andato a combattere in montagna. Arriva la notizia che un intero battaglione tedesco, truppe alpine e della fanteria fascista stanno attraversando il Lago Maggiore per atterrare a Canobbio. Bisogna cercare di fermarli ad ogni costo. George e Monetta con una macchina si avviano ed incontrano una colonna di circa 500/600 uomini, delle Bande Reali, con rinforzo di Fiamme Verdi. Si ritrovano così tutti sul bordo di una valle aperta, con leggere colline che digradano verso il Lago Maggiore e la strada che sembra un nastro grigio, completamente libera. Paterson e Monetta studiano la situazione e il colonnello dice che Dio quel giorno è stato buono. Didio suggerisce di andare oltre e chiede a George se vuole andare con loro. Lui accetta con un "in bocca al lupo" e si ritrova stipato in una delle due macchine organizzate per arrivare al limite di un canyon dove Didio li fa fermare per continuare a piedi. Dopo 10 minuti arrivano ad un ponte un po' più danneggiato di quanto si diceva. Il vecchio Monetta, con la barba lunga e più orso che mai, li raggiunge. In quel momento iniziano di cannoneggiamenti e si vede in distanza una colonna che viene disintegrata e i sopravvissuti che si dileguano per salvarsi. I partigiani cominciano a rispondere al fuoco con le loro armi leggere. Mentre ritornano alle due auto, il nemico raggiunge la sommità della collina e loro ora si trovano esposti al fuoco nemico, impossibilitati a muoversi. Al primo momento di calma Monetta si lancia nel primo spazio aperto proprio davanti ai colpi che arrivano alle sue spalle. Poi George fa altrettanto, infine Didio con i suoi uomini. Ma rimangono ancora tutti bloccati. Se i partigiani fossero riusciti a tenere i tedeschi giù nel fondovalle fino al calare della notte, forse si sarebbe riusciti a fuggire nell'oscurità. Ma mancano ancora molte ore al buio e il

fuoco partigiano sembra diminuire. La battaglia va avanti per altre 2 ore, poi, pian piano gli spari cessano. C'è uno strano silenzio, innaturale, e per ridurre la tensione iniziano tutti a mangiare le loro razioni. Dopo altre scaramucce con il nemico, altri caduti e una volta finite le munizioni, George si trova ad affrontare alcuni tedeschi che lo colpiscono e lo scaraventano contro una roccia, facendogli perdere conoscenza.

Capitolo 18

George si sveglia a causa di un ruggito che fa saltare anche i suoi cattura tori. Un grande uomo in uniforme, un sergente maggiore degli alpini, si mette ad imprecare verso i soldati tedeschi che vogliono sparare ai prigionieri anziché usarli per avere informazioni. Mentre si avviano, un soldato estrae una Luger e spara tre colpi nel corpo di Monetta, che giace a terra. Al bivacco tedesco George viene riconosciuto e interrogato brevemente da un sergente delle S.S. Dopo, viene caricato su un camion della Wehrmacht e condotto a Canobbio. Qui ci sono altri prigionieri, ma nessuno che lo conosce, e così si presenta come il Maggiore Giorgio dei Partigiani, e racconta loro della morte di Didio, Monetta e gli altri. Una volta caricati tutti su dei camion, vengono portati attraverso paesi deserti fino a Novara, alla prigione locale. Qui George viene messo in una cella con altri 40 o 50 uomini, tutti interessati a chiedere notizie. Un uomo lo riconosce e si dispiace che lo abbiano arrestato. Costui si presenta come Pico e dice che lo aveva visto una volta con il Generale Arca. Il giorno dopo George viene portato in un ufficio dove un sergente maggiore delle SS gli dice in un buon italiano "Si sieda Tenente Paterson" e gli spiega che, se collabora nel raccontargli cosa è successo dopo la sua fuga da San Vittore, le cose potrebbero prendere una buona strada. George allora racconta di aver vissuto con i partigiani, senza dare particolari dettagli e senza menzionare la sua visita in Svizzera. Il sergente non approfondisce le risposte e lo lascia andare. Dopo un mese di carcere, il giorno dell'armistizio George ha finalmente la prima possibilità di mandare sue notizie all'esterno della prigione. Durante la carcerazione, George aveva fatto amicizia con uno dei prigionieri, che non aveva più di 18 anni e che era un idealista. Era stato scelto fra il gruppo di prigionieri che sarebbe stato inviato in Germania come lavoratore. Confessa però a George che la sua intenzione è di fuggire, non di andare in Germania e così George scrive una lettera indirizzata a John, dove gli racconta quello che gli è successo, che Monetta e Didio sono morti, di non preoccupare Karen dicendogli della cattura e di dare sue notizie alla famiglia. Il giovane Giuseppe nasconde il foglio e gli assicura che lo avrebbe consegnato seguendo le istruzioni ricevute.

Una mattina George viene chiamato e gli si dice di prepararsi perché verrà trasferito. All'esterno della cella lo aspettano due delle SS che, mentre lo conducono ad una macchina in attesa, gli dicono: "Venga con noi e se tenta qualcosa le spariamo". George chiede se lo stavano portando via per la corte marziale, ma ottiene solo uno scossone da parte dei due militari. Dopo alcuni minuti arrivano alla stazione ferroviaria di Novara, e viene caricato su un treno che va ad Est. Una volta a Milano centrale, lo aspetta un'altra macchina, per ricondurlo a San Vittore. "Mio Dio, pensa George tristemente, un altro inverno qui".

THE MOUTH OF THE WOLF

by
JOHN WINDSOR
of Brentwood Bay
British Columbia



George Paterson about 1945



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS is a true story. There may be, because it happened more than twenty years ago, some minor errors and omissions. The names in some cases have been changed to avoid embarrassment and, of course, the conversations have had to be reconstructed. Apart from this, though, every attempt has been made by both George Paterson and myself to tell the story exactly as it happened.

I would dedicate it to all those who worked and fought so that Italy might be free.

JOHN WINDSOR

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by
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INTRODUCTION

by

Field-Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.

I HAVE read this book with the greatest interest. It is a tale of human endeavour in war by brave men who refused to give in—whatever difficulties came their way. It shows what can be done by men of a fighting race who are determined to persevere, and finally to conquer—or die in the attempt.

The author is totally blind. He was serving with the 2nd Canadian Armoured Regiment in Italy, when his tank was hit and he was blinded. He came to England in 1944 for training at St. Dunstan's: he had to learn to be blind, and this he did.

Apart from the purely personal story, the military and soldierly aspects of the book will appeal to many—as, indeed, they did to me. I commend the book to all who are interested in the human side to warfare, which is so often neglected by historians. And the story told by John Windsor has the great merit of being true.

*Montgomery of Alamein
F.M.*

Rozzaw cutp

all steps
benchi

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THREE men were waiting on the further side. Two, roughly dressed, with rifles slung across their shoulders, appeared to be peasants, but the third, though similarly clad, had an obvious air of authority. He was a middle-aged man, lean, grey-haired, with a bristling moustache and the look of a soldier. Stepping forward, hand outstretched, he greeted George.

voshik

selato

'Major Robertson, let me welcome you to Free Italy. I'm Colonel Monetta, formerly of the Royal Sardinian cavalry, and I am to be your liaison officer with our partisan brigades.'

George took an immediate liking to the man. He looked tough and resolute and there was something honest and steadfast in his grey-blue eyes.

feto
france

'I'm delighted to be here,' he replied, not altogether truthfully, 'and very pleased to be able to work with so distinguished a soldier. This is my wireless operator and bodyguard, Corporal Watson.'

Sinceramente

'The brigadiers are coming in to Malesco to meet you,' continued Monetta when the introductions were completed. 'It's only a couple of miles along the road. I'm sorry we haven't got transport, but only a few trucks have been captured so far and they're out with the different bands.'

Their way led round the shoulder of a mountain along a road bordered by rough-built stone walls beyond which there were vineyards and an occasional small white-washed cottage. There was activity in the village. Fifteen or twenty roughly dressed mountaineers each with a rifle or pistol strapped to his belt, lounged about outside the

v. pueti

THE MOUTH OF THE WOLF

lupo

largest house. They were led inside, where the band leaders with their chief lieutenants awaiting them.

George was introduced to the principals. The first was Superbi, leader of the Socialists, a round, jolly man, fat and comfortable looking. Very different were Arca and DiDio, leaders of the Green Flames and Royalist bands. These two were young, enthusiastic ex-army officers, both with little knowledge of politics, but possessed of a burning desire to rid Italy of the Tedeschi.

sharappate

'Our Communist friend, Moscatelli, has sent word that he's too busy to come,' DiDio told him after he had shaken hands all round. 'Probably too busy trying to turn the peasants into Reds, if the truth were known.'

The other two leaders nodded in angry agreement and George surmized that there was little love lost between Moscatelli and the other chieftains.

'Ah, well,' said Superbi after a slight pause, 'as he's not here he's not here. Sit down, Major, and have a drink.' With that he lowered himself on to a bench and picked up a half-empty mug of vino.

George was given a glass of wine and a chair and after an enthusiastic toast to 'Victory', gave a short talk, congratulating them on their past success and promising the future co-operation of the Allied governments. This was well received with smiles and nods of approval, and Arca came over to slap his shoulder.

'It is good that you have come today, Major. Tomorrow at dawn Superbi and I are going to attack an outpost where there's a garrison of these German pigs. You'll see that we mean business.'

Aebe

D. W. Aufst.

'Splendid. I'd like to come along and see the fun.'

It was arranged that he would spend the night at Arca's headquarters a few miles to the east, and when the meeting broke up he went off with the Green Flames along with Watson, Monetta and a couple of well-armed characters

[Redacted]

who had been added to his entourage as bodyguards and runners. *Albe*

Before dawn they were in position on the high ground above the outpost, a small, undistinguished village which spread across the entrance to a narrow valley. *Distretto*

'Superbi's men are on the other side,' explained Arca as they lay together behind one of the low stone walls that criss-crossed the countryside.

It was a grey misty morning, but they could make out the buildings below.

'You see that big house over to the right with the barn underneath? That's where the Tedeschi are quartered. We'll start stirring them up now.' *grangio*

He nodded to one of his guards who was crouched near by and the man, hurriedly aiming, let off a shot. Almost immediately it was answered by a fusillade from Superbi's men on the other hill. A face peered out from one of the upstairs windows, then disappeared again as rifles cracked up and down the hillside. For a few minutes there was silence from the German position, but then, as though getting over their first surprise, they began to return the fire and George instinctively ducked as a bullet whistled close overhead. *impossibilita' cameru mi nautu' g*

'Here, give me that rifle,' he ordered one of his bodyguards who was firing rounds with more enthusiasm than care. *grump*

Taking the weapon and sighting carefully he let off several rounds at one of the windows. It was impossible to tell whether he had hit anything, but he felt better and returned the weapon to its impatient owner.

The battle continued for ten or fifteen minutes without casualties to the Italians, until one man was hit in the shoulder. Then on the terrace below another partisan jerked and flopped over backwards, a slow trickle of blood oozing from a mortal wound in the middle of his forehead. *Mort*

Suddenly something appeared at one of the farmhouse windows. It was a kitchen broom with a man's white shirt attached. *scife*

'Look, look,' called several voices, 'they've surrendered.' 'Stop shooting. Stop shooting,' bellowed Arca. 'Pass the word along.'

After a minute or so both hillsides relapsed into silence and then the farm door opened and a line of German soldiers, hands over their heads, filed out. Like boys suddenly released from school, the partisans rushed down the hillsides, whooping, hallooing, racing with each other to be first to reach the prisoners.

The Germans were a sorry and frightened lot, about twenty of them, commanded by a middle-aged sergeant. They had with them a couple of wounded and one dead man. *feriti* *giocattolo*

'Kamerad, Kamerad,' they kept repeating, fearful that their throats were going to be slit. *to flate*

'What are you going to do with them?' Paterson asked Superbi who had just panted up.

'Oh, we'll take their equipment and put them across the border into Switzerland.'

After an hour's heated discussion as to the fair distribution of weapons, ammunition and food, the bands dispersed to their own areas. The captives were marched off under strong guard, while George and his group returned to Malesco where he planned to make his temporary quarters.

During the next couple of weeks the partisans worked south, coming down from the mountains into the valley of the Toce River and mopping up the isolated German detachments as they progressed. These detachments, never more than a platoon in strength, put up little resistance and seemed to be overawed by the size of the forces against them. *sh. stage an act*

'Just as well,' thought Paterson grimly, for his new friends, kind and hospitable as they were, had with few exceptions not the slightest idea of war and could have been badly mauled by a determined foe. He was rather surprised that the enemy had not reacted more strongly and almost every day expected to hear that a German fighting battalion had moved into the area. But as this did not happen he guessed that every front-line soldier was tied down, trying to stem the Allied advance from the South.

The partisans were slowly moving forward, averaging three or four miles in a good day. When they didn't move, George visited the four brigades and their commanders, including Moscatelli. He was impressed by his driving force. Of the other leaders, Arca and DiDio were strictly military men, while Superbi was a politician who readily admitted that he was no soldier. In fact, if he hadn't had a good second-in-command, Superbi would have been in serious trouble. On the other hand, Moscatelli, a stocky, powerfully built man of about thirty-five, was both soldier and politician. He was a product of the Milan slums, for a long time an opponent of the régime, who had only recently returned from Moscow, travelling through Yugoslavia.

He had been highly trained during his stay with the Russians in both guerrilla tactics and political activity, and aided by a powerfully built lieutenant who had an evil reputation for solving political differences with a bullet, he had enjoyed great success in mobilizing or conscripting the peasants of his area into the Communist brigade. It was by far the largest unit, about two thousand men, while the others had about five hundred each. George noted that, despite Moscatelli's drive and determination, his force, like the others, lacked trained officers and N.C.O.s, and was equally disorganized and unpredictable.

The Communist leader returned the other brigadiers' distrust and dislike in good measure, though this was not

particularly unusual, for as far as Paterson could determine they were all mutually mistrustful. In addition, Moscatelli despised his fellows, being supremely confident that he was the only one who knew where he was going and how he would get there.

'Mark my words,' he answered George, 'after the war the workers will run this country and you'll see Italy with a Communist government. We're the party of the future.'

By the latter half of September they were closing in on Domodossola, the only fair-sized town in the area, situated at the open base of the horseshoe in gently rolling country. There were about two hundred German soldiers in the town, quite sufficient if they wished to put up a stiff and possibly successful defence, but the partisan leaders, fresh from their minor victories, were supremely confident as their columns closed round the town and cut the road to Novara and the South.

Once the trap was closed bullets began to pour in upon the beleaguered centre from all sides and this was answered by the chatter of spandaus and the crackle of small-arms fire. The battle continued for a while, and then the German commander, feeling that his honour was satisfied, hoisted a white bedsheet above the town hall in token of surrender. This lack of fighting spirit puzzled George until he had a chance to see the prisoners, a sorry lot, mostly elderly reservists, unwilling conscripts who by no stretch of the imagination could be considered front-line troops. In addition, there were fifty or sixty Ukrainians who had been drafted into the Wehrmacht and who were now quite ready to throw in their lot with the partisans, just so long as someone fed them. Their offer was accepted and they did quite well, being the only disciplined troops in the whole rebel army.

With the taking of Domodossola the bands seemed content to sit back and rest upon their laurels. They were,

almost without exception, parochially minded. This was their land. They had freed it and now the job was to guard it. As for the rest of the country, that was someone else's responsibility. To Paterson such a policy spelt disaster. These three thousand lightly armed and undisciplined men couldn't stand up against any sort of organized attack. Their only hope was to keep advancing, employ hit-and-run tactics and spread the uprising until it became too big to be stamped out, instead of sitting here and waiting to be picked off when the Germans were good and ready. He emphasized this point at the councils of war, but he could not push his views too far, for he was merely an observer and an adviser.

The commanders gave lip service to his idea of attack. Possibly they believed in it themselves, but they could only go as far and as fast as their men would allow. Each was suspicious that if they should advance one of the others might gain control here.

George had an example of this hostility one evening when he drove up with Arca to visit the Green Flames' headquarters. Their road lay through some of Moscatelli's territory, and as they drove along in the half-light a shot was fired at them from a scrub-covered hillside. It hit the truck just behind Arca, fortunately missing him.

The bodyguard tumbled out and went in pursuit, but the would-be assassin had disappeared.

'Comrade Moscatelli is trying to solve his problems,' commented Arca dryly.

'I think,' said Superbi at the end of one long and heated council meeting, 'that we should first organize the government of this liberated territory and put the whole area in a state of defence. Then, with this as our base we can advance.'

George felt cynical. Superbi, the bon-vivant, had requisitioned a comfortable house with a good wine supply

and he had installed a pretty mistress. Who would want to advance from that?

News of their drive down the Toce Valley had been sent through Switzerland to the Allied-controlled Italian government in the South, and they had immediately sent a representative to act in their interest as administrator in the area. He arrived early one morning, brought in by men from one of the outposts after having travelled up from Rome through the length of German-held territory. A mild little man with gold-rimmed spectacles and a university background that earned him the appellation of Professor, he immediately set about organizing an administration with a governing council drawn half from the partisan bands and half from the civilian population of the town and surrounding countryside.

Troubles were to beset this body, but at its first meeting good news was received. A company of Arca's men guarding a section of the Lake Maggiore shoreline, their eastern boundary, spotted a small armada crossing from the opposite shore. It proved to be several launches towing a number of barges crowded with Fascist infantry. The Green Flames organized an ambush and, as the boats came in to beach, they opened a withering fire, killing and wounding many of the Fascists who retreated across the lake in great disorder.

Despite this good news there were grave problems for the embryo government in Domodossola. Captured ammunition was running short and the military half of the junta was so concerned about this that it seemed even less likely they would strike out until they had fresh supplies. Then there was the question of food. No one had any money to feed more than three thousand very hungry partisans. Cattle and supplies were commandeered much to the annoyance of the peasant farmers and civilian members of the council while the Professor, caught in the middle, had

increasing difficulty in keeping the various factions from each other's throats.

'I think the best thing I can do is take a trip back to Locarno,' decided George at one such angry meeting. 'It will be quicker that way to arrange air-drops of weapons and ammo, and I can tell them that we desperately need money to pay for supplies.'

The Professor nodded. 'Very good, Giorgio. Impress on them that a government without money is like a well without water.'

A truck was quickly found to take him thirty miles up to Malesco. Colonel Monetta, who was accompanying him this far, arranged with one of the villagers to guide him across the frontier to the nearest railway station, several miles beyond the border.

'The Signore can catch the milk train which goes at four in the morning,' suggested a grizzled but shrewd mountaineer. 'We won't leave here until one, so you can get some sleep. I'll wake you.'

They crossed the frontier about half a mile east of the bridge over which he had come into Italy, and then walked another mile along a hillside slope before striking a road. The journey was uneventful, with no sign of the Swiss border patrol. Soon after three he was at the station.

'I'll get your ticket,' offered the old man, 'the station-master is a good friend of mine.'

At Locarno, a taxi whisked him through the light early morning traffic out to the Albergo Sole where mine host greeted him like a long-lost brother. Because of the war, visitors were rare and business deplorable.

'Tell me what I can do for you, Signore. The Albergo Sole is at your service.'

'Right at the moment I need a room and a hot bath, and then if you've got anything good for breakfast, I'm starved.'

After a shave, a bath and a meal, he felt fine. There was a phone in the bar. He must get in touch with Birback, but he'd have a drink first.

As he sat on the high stool relaxed and full of well-being, the swing door to the street opened and a young couple entered, an officer in uniform and a very pretty girl. Idly he glanced at them and then with a sudden start, turned hurriedly away. It was the lieutenant who had escorted him to the border a month ago. If he was recognized he could be arrested for re-entering the country and that would certainly louse up the plan.

Hunched over his drink, back carefully turned to the new arrivals, he awaited developments.

The barman took the couple's order, then came over to him.

'I beg your pardon, Signore, but the Lieutenant would like to speak to you.'

Oh damn, he thought, I'm for it now.

The Swiss looked up smiling as he came across. 'Back from your travels,' he greeted, with the slightest of winks. 'My fiancée and I would be delighted if you would have a drink with us.'

After a friendly chat, in which any reference to border crossing was carefully avoided, he excused himself and phoned Birback.

'This is a pleasant surprise, George. I'll be right over.'

'You've done splendidly,' commended Birback when they finished. 'I'll get all this information typed and sent to headquarters. As to the money and ammunition, that won't be any problem. We'll get off a code telegram to London laying down the air-drops and I'll phone McTayish to send money. It should all be arranged by tomorrow. Now, what are you doing tonight? Well, some friends of mine are throwing a party. What about coming along? I'll pick you up about nine.'

Before he went out that evening, he phoned Karen. It took some time to get the call through to Montreux, but finally he heard her voice at the other end of the line.

'Hello, my love. How are you?'

'George, oh, how wonderful. Where are you?'

'I'm in Locarno and missing you like the very devil.'

She laughed. 'That makes two of us, but now you're back, everything is going to be all right. When will I see you?'

'I can't make it this time, honey. I've got to go back tomorrow, it's just a rush trip.'

'Go back?' All the sparkle went out of her voice. 'But, darling, you've done your share. Why can't someone else go this time? I just couldn't stand it if anything happened to you.' She broke down and began to sob.

'Sweetheart, sweetheart,' he tried to soothe her, over a hundred miles of wire, 'nothing is going to happen to me. I'm taking lots of care and pretty soon I'll be back for good. Then we'll get married.'

Gradually she stopped crying, but her voice was flat and depressed, without the gaiety that he loved.

'Goodbye, darling,' she said finally after they had said all that could be said over a phone. 'I'm sorry I was so silly, but I'm frightened for you. Please come back soon.'

He heard the receiver click. Moodily he sat smoking, thinking of her and her words. It was a mistake to phone, he decided. Now we are both upset.

All next day he hung about with little to do. He was catching a late train back. Birback was going to meet him at the hotel at eleven with the money and a man to guide him across the frontier. Until then he was on his own.

After dinner he wandered down to the cabaret where he had taken Karen only a month ago and sat at the bar, drinking cognac and thinking of the evening they had spent together. Then they had been in a little world of

their own while the other couples had been no more than vague, unheeded shadows. Now he was the unheeded shadow, the outsider.

Lonely and depressed he walked along the beach to where they had lingered and told each other of their love. Somehow he expected comfort from this, but everything was different. The lake that had been so smooth was now rough and angry, while a cold east wind came out of the black and starless night to chill and buffet him.

Is this an ill omen for our future? he wondered with a shiver. 'Oh, hell,' he swore, trying to banish fancy. It's getting late and I've had too much to drink. Better return to the hotel and get ready.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BIRBACK was waiting with another man in his room. 'Got here a little early,' he explained, 'so we came on up. This is Carlo who knows the frontier. He'll get you across safely.'

The guide, a taciturn individual, moved over to the window while the other two sat on the bed.

'Here's the schedule of air-drops,' said Birback, passing him a typed sheet of onion skin. 'I don't need to remind you to be careful with it. And here,' he continued, picking up a rucksack from the bed, 'is the money, twenty million lire. That should keep you going for a while.'

George whistled. 'Twenty million lire. That's a lot. Nearly 200,000 dollars. I'll be glad to get it safely to Domodossola.'

Birback laughed. 'I know how you feel. I've been sitting on it all afternoon.' He looked at his watch. 'I'll run you to the station. Be sure to keep me posted on everything that is happening down there. Any messages you want to send for Karen I'll pass along and see that you get her replies when I have a courier going your way.'

The return journey was without incident until they reached the border. Carlo had obviously made this trip many times before and he led the way confidently as they approached the ravine which formed the boundary between the two countries. Then suddenly a man stepped out from the black mass of a clump of trees.

'Halt!' came the peremptory command and they heard a rifle bolt click. They froze as a figure approached, weapon at the ready. As he neared them George could make out the Swiss army uniform.

THE MOUTH OF THE WOLF

Twenty million lire is going to take some explaining was the thought that flashed through his mind.

'This man's an Italian refugee,' lied Carlo. 'His wife is dying in Malesco and I'm taking him back to be near her.'

The frontier guard seemed undecided. It was obvious from his questions that he was on the watch for cigarette smugglers, but as Carlo was carrying nothing and George had only the small rucksack he finally accepted their story and waved them on.

'I hope you find your wife better,' he said sympathetically, as they left him.

Reaching Malesco before dawn, George shook the protesting Monetta into action.

'I'm toting a fortune on my back, Colonel,' he explained, 'and the sooner we get it down to Domodossola, the better. Can you find us a truck?'

'Ah, Giorgio,' sighed the Colonel, lacing up his heavy boots, 'this is a hell of an hour to wake a man.'

While he was gone, searching for a vehicle, the woman of the house, who had been roused by their conversation, brought him some rolls and a cup of excellent coffee, undoubtedly contraband, for his breakfast.

In Domodossola where he officially handed over the currency, the Canadian found himself the hero of the hour. The Professor was ecstatic to the point of embracing him.

'Now that we have money we can truly organize a government.'

Even Moscatelli, normally aloof and suspicious, conceded that this was a token of good faith on the part of Russia's allies and grudgingly congratulated George. As far as the air-drops were concerned, all four brigadiers were delighted at the prospect of strengthening their fire-power.

The Green Flames were to receive the first consignment three days hence, and on that night George, Arca and a dozen of his men with two trucks camped on the drop area,

a flat-topped hill to the north of Domodossola. It was cold as they squatted round a fire; the night was clear and their plane should have no difficulty spotting its target. About midnight they saw the long bright fingers of searchlights and heard the faint sound of guns from far to the south.

'Must be a raid on down there. Somebody's getting hell.'

When their drop was due the hour came and went with no throb of plane engines. One-thirty, then two and George began to pace up and down in his impatience.

Damn the Air Force he thought. Not only was he missing a good night's sleep but yesterday, for the first time since they had captured Domodossola some German activity had been reported to the south and he wanted to get this fresh equipment and ammunition into partisan hands as quickly as possible.

By four o'clock they knew there was no hope for that night.

'I'm sorry,' he told Arca, 'but something went wrong somewhere.'

'Don't worry, Giorgio,' laughed the leader. 'If things ever went right in this war, then we would really be concerned. Let's go back to town and have breakfast. We will try again three nights from now.'

After sleeping until well into the afternoon, George awoke to ominous news. The partisans were dug in some ten to fifteen miles south of the town, along a good defensive line and reports had been coming in all morning of probing attacks on their positions. There had been nothing serious yet. One or two tanks, several platoons of infantry and some dive-bombing, with all the men, especially the Ukrainians, putting up a good fight. But George realized, even if many of the others didn't, that this was only a preliminary to something bigger.

Moscatelli was one of the few who understood the situation. 'I've pulled back all my forward patrols,' he told

George, 'and we'll see if we can hold them. If not, we'll go back and fight in the mountains.'

The Canadian nodded. 'I'm going to take a run down first thing in the morning and see what's happening. I'll let you know what the situation looks like.'

He was never to take the trip. In the small hours of the night, Monetta roused him with bad news.

'Wake up, wake up,' he urged as the younger man struggled into a sitting position. 'Word has just come down from Malesco that a whole German battalion, Alpine troops, and some Fascist infantry have got across Lake Maggiore and landed near Canobbio. We had a patrol in the area and they could do nothing but fall back into the mountains. They blew the bridge through the pass and that may slow the Germans down a little. DiDio is up there, assembling his brigade at Malesco, and he's going to move forward at dawn to try and halt them in the pass. If we don't stop them there, they'll be in behind us along the frontier and then ...' He drew a finger across his throat expressively.

Shocked into complete wakefulness by the gravity of the news, George pondered the situation briefly. The thrusts from the south were probably feints and if the Royalists couldn't stop them at the point where the bridge was blown, they could never hope to hold a force that size in the open country beyond. Could DiDio assemble his boys before the Germans arrived?

'I think we'd better get up there and see what's going on,' he told Monetta. 'I'll rouse Jack Watson while you get a car.'

They reached Malesco soon after daylight, but the partisan brigade had already marched out on the road to Canobbio.

'I'll drop you here, Jack, no point in your coming forward. If the Jerrys should knock us to hell and gone, you

nip back across the frontier and let John Birback know what's happened.'

'Good luck, sir,' said Watson, shaking hands.

They drove on a few miles overtaking and passing the long straggling column of five or six hundred men, mostly Royalists but reinforced by some detachments from the Green Flames.

'The brigadier went on ahead with some of the officers,' he was told. 'Only left a few minutes ago so you should be able to catch him.'

Slipping the Fiat into gear, George drove on. They hadn't gone much over a mile when coming round the bend of a hill, they spotted the Royalist chieftain's car, parked at the side of the road with DiDio himself carefully studying the ground ahead from the vantage point of an outcrop of rock.

They were at the edge of an open valley, a rather desolate stretch of country a mile across, bordered on the further side by a line of low mountains, beyond which lay the shore of Lake Maggiore.

'Follow the line of the road,' instructed DiDio after he had greeted the newcomers. 'Do you see over on the far side how it disappears into that cleft between the hills? That's the pass. A few hundred yards along is the bridge that we blew. It all looks quiet, so I think we've beaten the Tedeschi.'

Both Paterson and Monetta studied the ground professionally. The brooding mountains were menacing in their silence, but there was no sign of troops, no sign of movement. The thin grey ribbon of road was bare of all traffic. The Colonel nodded as though satisfied with what he saw.

'The good God is with us today,' he agreed.

'We're going on to reconnoitre the bridge,' continued DiDio. 'If it's not too badly blown we might get the

brigade across and set up our positions further ahead. Do you want to come with us, Giorgio?'

George thought it was folly for the commander and his senior officers to push on so far ahead, doing a job that could be better handled by a scouting patrol, but he could see that DiDio and the others were set on going. Any hesitation on his part might be misinterpreted.

'Okay,' he agreed, '*in bocca al lupo*.'

They piled into two cars, ten of them, and sped across the deserted valley. At the entrance to the defile that was almost a canyon, the leading vehicle pulled to a halt.

'This is the last place we can turn,' explained DiDio getting out. 'We'll leave the cars here and walk. It's only five or six hundred yards along.'

The road from here on had been blasted out. A cliff rose on the left, while on the outer side, where the ground dropped away sharply, there was a low, stone guard wall. In less than ten minutes they were up to the bridge, a small, fairly modern concrete structure much more badly damaged than the reports had indicated.

'Your boys did a damn good demolition job,' commended Paterson surveying the mass of wreckage. 'I wouldn't advise trying to take your brigade across. What remains could come down at any minute.'

The Brigadier agreed. 'We'll dig in on the ridge above and catch the bastards as they come along.'

Both men strolled over and sat on the wall, lighting cigarettes. Glancing far back along the road, they could see the snakelike column of the brigade debouching on to open ground. 'We'll just finish these, then we'll head back to meet them.'

Old Monetta, unshaven and looking more grizzled than ever, joined them.

* 'Into the mouth of the wolf.'

'Strange we haven't seen or heard anything of their forward patrols. The Tedeschi usually...'

He got no further when all hell broke loose. From somewhere high on the ridge heavy machine-guns stuttered into life. It was so unexpected that for seconds they just sat, confused by the mounting crescendo of noise as echoes began to multiply and remultiply the sound. Then they saw the distant column disintegrate into a multitude of running figures as the fire tore into the ranks and the men dived for safety. *fridac*

Schizmate 'Look out,' shouted one of the partisans as bullets splattered against the cliff wall on the other side of the road, 'they're on the other hill too. Get down behind the wall.'

Striatore They began to crawl back towards the cars, while the machine-guns intermittently peppered the wall and the cliff.

lettand 'For God's sake, Giorgio,' yelled DiDio who was immediately behind him, 'keep your backside down.'

mitt He cursed but flattened himself, struggling with the tommy-gun which kept flopping off his shoulder. The firing and the echoes were increasing in intensity as the battle opened up. There was the slow beat of heavy machine-guns, the rat-tat-tat of light ones mixed with the sound of Italian Bredas. That would be the Blackshirt company which was with the Germans.

After a while he heard heavier reports, twelve-point-sevens and twenty-millimetres, he guessed. They must have kept a lot of their stuff down behind the ridge out of sight. Now they were bringing them forward. *forchit*

Across the valley the partisans, obviously stunned by the suddenness of the attack, were beginning to answer back. A few machine-guns burst into life and there was some scattered rifle fire. *sfarsop*

Good lads, he thought, they're doing their best.

fridac On they went, half dragging themselves, half crawling. At the moment the enemy above were out of sight and all they had to worry about were those on the other hill, but once they reached the entrance to the canyon they would be out on open ground where they would be exposed to a hail of fire. He thought of this as he crawled along, but only in passing. His chief concern at the moment was to keep down behind the wall, and to keep moving!

Striatore It took them more than half an hour to work their way back to the cars. Meantime the enemy had pushed forward along the hilltop so that now the two Fiats were in their line of fire. As he watched, tracers began striking them, first one and then the other. Glass shattered, there were wisps of smoke and then flames as the petrol tanks were hit.

Cautiously he surveyed the ground immediately ahead. There was an open area twenty yards across where the cars stood and which was now stitched by bursts of machine-gun fire. This had to be crossed. Immediately beyond was dead ground that was still safe. On its far side another open stretch ended where a big cement storm culvert ran under the road. After that there was no more cover and any further movement would be suicide. The culvert would at least offer some shelter. There was always the faint hope of some unexpected development that might give them a chance to escape.

mitt Several partisans at the head of the crawling line had got across the bad stretches before the guns had been able to bear, and now they were huddled in the culvert. As he watched, two more made a dash during a lull in the firing, and they made it. *forchit*

A third man, encouraged by this followed. He reached the dead ground. But as he did so the hail of bullets began again. He was safe where he was. For some reason he tried to cover the last section. He hadn't taken more than two

paces before he crumpled to the ground and lay motionless.

At the next lull Monetta sprinted across the first open space and dived for cover, just ahead of the bullets snapping at his heels.

It was now George's turn, then DiDio and his runner. He waited as minutes passed, five, ten. Several times, the fire slackening, he made ready to go. Then it would begin again and he eased back to the ground.

My God, they've got a hate on, he thought grimly.

Finally it slowed, then ceased. This was the moment, and with it came a sudden fear. In a few seconds he could be dead. He thought of the twenty-millimetre firing from the opposite hill. If they turned it on the wall it would knock one hell of a big hole in it and him. He had to go.

Grasping his tommy-gun he sprang forward, expecting to feel the sudden hammerlike blow of a bullet that would smash him to the ground. In a furious burst of energy he covered the twenty yards, then dived for cover beside Monetta who had waited for him. As he hit the earth, DiDio was rising to follow him. He came to his feet and took his first leap as the machine-guns began to chatter again. He stumbled, an awful look of agony crossed his white face and his hand went to his left knee as he went down. He lay there in the middle of the road with a smashed knee. His comrades watched in helpless horror as the Germans cut him to pieces, making his dead body jerk convulsively.

'Jesus,' muttered George, stunned by the suddenness of the tragedy. DiDio, only twenty-four, had been his good friend, a loyal and courageous comrade, who had ably commanded hundreds of men. He was the finest type of Italian.

Monetta, looking grey and old, tugged at his sleeve. 'Come on, Giorgio, we can do no good here.'

He nodded, DiDio's runner, the last man, had shouted out that he was staying where he was rather than risk crossing the open space, so the sooner they joined the others the better.

Another momentary lull when the guns lifted to take on more distant targets gave them their awaited chance to join the five others who had reached the temporary safety of the culvert.

George cautiously examined the terrain from both ends. The upper side faced the slope on which the Germans were positioned, but was shielded to a certain extent by some boulders and outcrops of rock. The lower end was also sheltered by a number of large rocks, but beyond there was a barren field which sloped away for several hundred yards without any sign of cover.

He grinned wryly at old Monetta. 'I wonder what the military textbooks say about this sort of situation.'

The older man scowled and slapped the butt of his sub-machine-gun. 'All we can do is try to take some of the bastards with us.'

They sat back to await developments while the firing continued from both sides. If the partisans could hold their position and keep the Germans pinned down on this side of the valley until nightfall, they might just have a chance of getting back under cover of darkness, but George knew it was the slimmest of chances. There were hours of daylight left and it seemed to him that partisan fire was slowly but perceptibly slackening while from above they heard the reports of new and heavier guns. Now eighty-eights were shelling their positions and a forty-seven-millimetre anti-tank gun was trying to get at them. It couldn't actually bear on the culvert, but it was shattering rocks above them and bombarding the entrance with flying pieces of rock.

They huddled at the lower end, trying to avoid rock

^{xlegg}
splinters and the occasional ricochet that whined into the tunnel. Little hope was left in any of them. Money, documents and letters were destroyed. They rechecked tommy-guns, hand grenades and the remaining ammunition.

The battle went on for about two hours, then firing began to slow down until finally it ceased altogether. There was a strange, unnatural silence. They had some rations with them and now they nibbled, not because they were hungry but rather to reduce the mounting tension. Only Monetta broke the silence with an irritated snarl at the youngest partisan, a boy of no more than eighteen.

'For God's sake, lad, get ready to fight like the devil.'

Suddenly they heard something close by. A rock fell and started a stream of pebbles. Almost at the same instant footsteps sounded on the road above.

Monetta and another man moved slowly to the mouth of the culvert where they crouched listening. Then everything happened at once. Both men jumped out and let go with long sweeping bursts while the others erupted after them. No orders were given. No orders were needed.

Their position was hopeless. This type of fighting was known for its savage and bitter quality. No quarter was expected, while to be wounded was only a slower sentence of death. As George came out of the culvert two grenades went off almost in his face. Fortunately they were Italian red jobs which did little more than create a flash, a lot of noise and give a man a bad scare. A piece from one nicked the inside of his wrist, but in the mad fury of the moment he ignored it.

^{lania and} Flinging himself behind a boulder he noticed that two of their group were making a dash for it down the hill. Thirty yards from the road they paused an instant and let go with their sub-machine-guns. Then they raced on again, but one had only taken a few paces when he was caught in a burst from an unseen German higher on the hillside. He

jerked, turned about and collapsed while his comrade ^{rolls} raced on disappearing from sight in a patch of dead ground. ^{comrade}

A German in the green uniform of the Alpine troops forgot caution as he fired after the running partisan. George raised his gun quickly, but before he had time to fire there was a staccato stutter on his left and the German ^{shuddered} shuddered, dropped his rifle and slumped, slowly sliding forward over a boulder.

'That's one to go with me,' yelled old Monetta with a cold grin, as he wriggled into a new position.

There was no time for congratulations. More grenades exploded. Then George spotted one of the enemy creeping from boulder to boulder occasionally outlined against the sky. He got off a short burst which caught the man in the chest. And that one's for me, he thought.

There was less movement now. Everyone was out of sight except Monetta, who had stayed close beside him. Suddenly there came a burst from close at hand. He whipped round to see Monetta sagging down with his head in a shallow pool of water while blood was beginning to stain his jacket from three or four holes in his side.

Lying quiet for a moment, trying to estimate from where the shots had come, George began to squirm and crawl round the angle of a rock. There he was, the man who had killed old Monetta, peering cautiously over a boulder not fifteen yards away, his head in profile. Quietly lifting his tommy-gun and carefully aiming, George let go a vicious burst, and before the man crumpled he saw with satisfaction the gaping wound that suddenly appeared in his head. Another for company, Monetta.

Letting go at fleeting targets with several more bursts he was trying to crawl further away from the road when he caught sight of another German, this time in full view over on the right. Raising his weapon he quickly squeezed the

trigger. Nothing happened.

'Damn—blast—no ammunition.'

This was it. The others were all dead and within a few minutes, if he remained crouched here defenceless, he would join them. There was just one very slim chance. Throwing aside his useless gun he stood up, getting ready to feel the burst that would be the end.

He had only a few seconds before the Germans were on him, angered by their losses and out for blood. Grabbing his arms, they began kicking and punching vindictively while one caught him across the side of the head with a rifle butt. He felt the warm blood trickle down his cheek. Dazed and staggering, he was roughly flung back against a large rock with such force that he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WHAT now, he wondered dully as he came to with a splitting head, fighting back waves of nausea. Two of the enemy stepped back several feet and he heard them cock their rifles.

'Hold it, hold it, you stupid dolts.'

It was a roar that made both George and his captors jump. He glanced up and saw a man striding briskly down the hillside, a big imposing figure in the uniform of a sergeant-major of Alpine troops.

The Germans snapped to attention as the warrant-officer stormed up.

'Who told you to shoot prisoners?' he demanded. 'Don't you fools realize that they can give us information? Take him back to camp and see that he doesn't escape.'

The men grouped about him and with a rifle in his back, prodded him towards the road. As they went by Monetta's body one of the men, pulling out a Luger, savagely put three shots into the dead Italian's head, then quickly went through his pockets. But finding nothing of value he cursed obscenely, took off the dead man's boots and hurried on.

Back on the road George looked about. He counted ten dead Germans sprawled on the scene of the battle and all the partisans who had been with him in the culvert except for the man who had fled down the hill. Maybe he had escaped.

We made them pay, he thought grimly; no wonder they wanted to shoot me.

Another group of the enemy joined them with a prisoner, DiDio's courier, who had stayed at the mouth of

the defile and been picked up there. Together they were hustled up the hill slope, over the ridge, and down into the small valley beyond where the Germans had a bivouac and George, as he was urged along, used the time to go over his cover story. *1830 words*

has been I'm Major George Robertson, escaped from P.O.W. camp Padua a year ago last September, and I've been hiding in North Italy ever since.

There were only a few troops in the bivouac. Most of the regiment had advanced across the valley in pursuit of the fleeing partisans, and these hastened over to stare and fling abuse at the captives. This George tried to ignore until suddenly one of the men stepped out from the others and pushed up to him, staring intently.

'Ober-lieutenant Paterson,' he shouted in sudden recognition, and then broke into excited German which George could not follow. But there was no need. He had recognized the other.

It was Willi, one of the soldiers who had been doing a tour of guard duty at San Vittore while he was there. He remembered the man distinctly, a loutish fellow not as brutal as most. But to run into him again at this moment would shoot his cover story all to hell. He'd have to revert to being George Paterson again, and just hope they wouldn't send him back to San Vittore.

An S.S. sergeant questioned him, but the interrogation was brief. He only had to confirm Willi's testimony that he was indeed Lieutenant Paterson, and had escaped from prison some three and a half months ago. There was no point in denying this now and as long as he could keep them from knowing that he had crossed into Switzerland, they just might treat him as an escaped prisoner rather than a spy. Fortunately he wasn't searched or the forged identity card would have made an embarrassing complication. He must destroy it at the first opportunity.

After the interview he and the courier were ordered into an open truck and guarded by half a dozen Wehrmacht, set off on the road to Canobbio on the lakeshore. It was a short drive down narrow, twisting, precipice-flaunting roads. At one point they ran into another lorry packed with Germans coming up. *with a plastic*

It was impossible to pass and their vehicle had to back up and then pull off the road. While they were doing this the soldiers on the other truck got down. They had rifles, several carried spades. For a few sickening moments George wondered if this was an arranged rendezvous and if these men were the firing squad, who had come to this lonely place for a summary execution. However, no sharp order came to fall in. Instead they urinated, lit cigarettes, stood about talking and laughing until he realized they were just reinforcements to the front and the spades were only normal entrenching equipment.

It was evening when they reached Canobbio, an insignificant place hemmed in between the grey sullen lake and black frowning mountains. There were a lot of troops about, including black-shirted Fascists. They had little time to look before the lorry halted and they were unceremoniously prodded into a large and heavily guarded shed. *again*

There were other prisoners there. No one he knew but several recognized him, for they came up and spoke, calling him Maggiore Giorgio which had been his name with the partisans.

They had been taken near by, so he told them of the battle and of the deaths of DiDio, Monetta and the others. There was the heavy silence that such news brings. Finally, one young fellow shrugged and gave a hard laugh.

'Well, at least they're out of it. We're in the mouth of the wolf.'

The floor was of heavy boards with cracks between.

After a time George sat down, leaned against a wall and fished out the compromising identity card, tore it into small pieces and carefully poked them, together with his dog-tags, down between the boards. As the last piece disappeared he felt safer.

Overall he was physically exhausted, worn out by the hours of battle, strain and tension. Rolling over on the bare boards he slept, never hearing the door open to admit new prisoners, nor the clatter made by the guards when they finally brought in a meagre ration of bread and black coffee. It was the raw damp cold of early dawn that finally woke him, shivering, aching, hungry and dirty.

The others were waking as well, shivering and spitting. Forcing down his feeling of disgust at this habit he turned away towards the wall.

About an hour later the door opened and they were each given a piece of bread and a mug of weak, lukewarm, black coffee. At mid-morning they were herded out, a very sorry-looking group, and loaded aboard two trucks, each guarded by half a dozen soldiers armed with sub-machine-guns. George considered the possibility of trying to escape once they were in motion, but their escort was a tough, alert-looking lot and they would have him riddled with bullets before he could hit the road.

Their way led south along the lakeshore, through villages that had once prospered on tourists but now looked bleak and almost deserted. After an hour they left Lake Maggiore and headed south for another twenty-five miles until they came to a fairly large town.

'Novara,' muttered the man beside him. 'It's my home.'

An Italian motor-cycle policeman met them on the outskirts and led them through the streets to a dirty-looking, sprawling, grey stone building that somehow had a familiar stamp.

'The prison,' confirmed the man beside him.

They were ordered into a bleak, whitewashed reception office where a clerk carefully noted their names. Then the prison warders took over and they were marched across a courtyard along several bare cement corridors to a large community cell into which they were pushed. The room was already well filled with forty or fifty men and their arrival did nothing to ease the overcrowding. But they were cheerfully greeted and eagerly questioned for news.

George looked about curiously. They were partisans from their dress and talk, but there were none that he knew personally, although he recalled having seen several of them while visiting the different bands. A man of about thirty, tough looking and powerfully built for an Italian, came over.

'I'm sorry they got you, Maggiore Giorgio,' he greeted. 'They picked me up in the fighting south of Domodossola. Got tanks in behind us and cut us off from the rest of the brigade. My name's Pico,' he went on, 'and I've seen you with General Arca.'

Pico had been a sergeant-major with an Italian paratroop unit, had fought in the desert against the Eighth Army and after Italy's collapse, had deserted and joined the partisans. He was quick-witted as well as tough and had already discovered what little information there was to be had.

'We're to be interrogated here,' he explained, 'but after that I don't know. This is only a transit prison. There's a rumour we are all going to Germany for forced labour, another that we're going to be shot. You can take your pick.'

George couldn't prevent a slight grin. 'In English we call that "Hobson's choice".'

As far as he knew he was the only partisan leader to have been caught and he had a nasty feeling that if the Germans wanted to make an example by shooting someone, he

shot out into the street. He asked the man who had spoken to him, but received only a negative shake of the head. Whether this was in answer to his question or because he didn't understand, George was not certain. However, he was not left long in ignorance. Within a few minutes they drew up at the Novara railroad station where he was ordered out, and with his watchful escort shouting and pushing a way through a crowd of gaping civilians, marched across the platform and aboard a waiting east-bound train.

Milan was in this direction and only twenty-five miles away. It was no great surprise an hour later when they pulled into the well-known station. Another car was waiting for them and they drove quickly through the busy familiar streets where only a year ago he and Roberto Oreste had played hide and seek with the Gestapo as they spirited prisoners away. He wondered what had happened to flamboyant Roberto who had disappeared from his old haunts and hadn't been heard of in months.

Sleet turned the streets and buildings grey and dirty. The route they took through the industrial suburbs confirmed his suspicions as to where they were bound. With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach he saw once again as they swung round a corner, the grim, machine-gun studded wall of San Vittore.

Oh, God, another winter of this, he thought gloomily.

would very likely be that example. Suppressing this thought as he was depressed enough already, he thought of Karen and their meeting on the beach at Montreux. Strange that she was only a few hours away by car. She might just as well be in another world.

The following morning he was called out by a warder and taken along to a small office for questioning. There was a young man behind the desk wearing the badges of a sergeant-major of the S.S.

Once they were alone his curt manner relaxed. 'Sit down, Lieutenant Paterson,' he said in good Italian. 'If you will co-operate and be frank with us, this won't take long and it will certainly help you when you come to trial. Now we know quite a bit about you up to the time that you escaped from San Vittore in July. What happened after that?'

George told a story about living with the partisans, carefully omitting any mention of his visits to Switzerland.

'I decided that my best course was to remain hidden and wait for our armies to arrive,' he concluded.

The idea that the Allied armies would reach North Italy normally sent S.S. officials and other fanatical Nazis into a tearing rage and their usual response was to launch into a tirade as to how Germany was still going to win the war. This man to George's surprise, agreed with him.

He nodded and lowered his voice. 'We can't hope to hold Italy much longer once the ground dries up, and your plan might have worked. Who were the people who sheltered you?'

'I can't remember,' George replied, and both men smiled at the inevitability of the answer.

The S.S. man continued his interrogation for a while, but did not press his questions or make any threats.

Finally George was dismissed feeling rather pleased

about the examination and very thankful there had been no awkward questions about Switzerland.

The days and weeks that followed seemed like an endless period of waiting, wondering what lay in store. Overcrowding made the large cell uncomfortable, but at least they had companionship and he had no trouble settling back into prison routine. The *buiolo* rumours, the rattle of tin cups and plates at mealtime, the jingling of warders' keys, the straw palliasses and the single threadbare blanket were all part of a pattern that had been too painfully familiar for him ever to forget. The food, if anything, was even worse than at San Vittore. The quantity was about the same, but the soup was weaker. However, most of the prisoners came from this area and their families kept them well supplied with parcels of food and cigarettes which the warders, who were not unfriendly, allowed through. These were shared with the lone Canadian whom the young partisans looked up to with considerable respect as one of their leaders. So the poor quality of the rations was not a serious problem.

George, with a lot of time upon his hands to think about his position, decided it was all for the best that neither Karen nor his family knew of his recapture. He must try if he got a chance, to get word to John Birback letting him know exactly what had happened. Also he hoped that John might be able to arrange an escape plan from the outside. But he must warn him to keep word of this from Karen. She had worried enough about his going back to Italy. To learn the Germans had him again would just add to her distress. The problem was, how to get a message out? Not one of his cell-mates had been released, nor was there much hope of it. The Italian warders, though inclined to be friendly, made it quite clear they would do nothing. They would take no risks that might get them into trouble with their German masters. He had been in almost a

month and it was Armistice Day before he had his first chance to send word outside.

It was after the evening meal. One of the warders came in to read out a list of names, including a number who had not been partisans at all but merely picked up on suspicion.

'You are being transferred to a labour battalion for war work in Germany,' he told them. 'Be prepared to move tomorrow after breakfast.'

George had in the last weeks become friendly with one of the prisoners, a boy no more than eighteen who had fought with Superbi's Socialist Brigade. This young fellow was an idealist, an ardent patriot who hated with equal intensity both Fascists and Nazis.

'Are you going to let them take you to Germany, Guiseppe?' George asked cautiously.

The young man spat savagely. 'I'll escape from their bloody labour battalion the first night. Then I'll go back into the hills.'

'Do you think you could take a very important letter into Switzerland? The man you hand it to will pay you well.'

'I don't want any pay, Maggiore Giorgio. You give me the letter and tell me where to go and I'll take it.'

Borrowing a piece of paper and a scrap of pencil from Pico, he sat down to write.

Dear John:

Another prison, worse than ever, full of lice and scabies but up to now I'm still in one piece. Narrowly escaped being shot. The danger still exists, but have goodish chance of getting away with it, I think. Here at the moment there is nothing I can do but wait and see what happens. Boring, but at least they don't isolate one in this dump.

If this gets to you, the bearer will be able to give you full details. It was partly my own fault getting caught. Let my natural instinct be overridden by a burst of Italian enthusiasm, and as a result, we arrived 'in bocca al lupo', and got cleaned up. Both Monetta and DiDio dead.

If you can start up anything your end, I'm sure that you will do all you can. Don't tell Karen I've been captured but if the worst happens, then I leave it to you to let her, and my family, know.

George

Holding the piece of paper, young Guiseppe took off his boot and pushed it way up into the toe. 'I'll get it there, never fear,' he assured George after receiving instructions. 'My brother used to bring over cigarettes and I've been across with him.'

Early next day the party left. Their going made a little extra room for the rest and during the next three weeks others were also hauled off for slave labour in the Fatherland. Then one morning George heard his own name called by the turnkey.

'Get your things,' he was ordered. 'You're moving.'

As he had nothing, not even a toothbrush or razor, this didn't take long. Maybe, he thought in sudden hope, they are sending me to a labour battalion. If so, he was pretty certain that he would be able to give them the slip. But this confidence ended when he got outside the cell. Waiting for him, were a couple of tough, burly S.S. men.

'Come with us,' ordered the older man in poor Italian, 'and if you try anything we'll shoot.' He touched his machine-pistol significantly and then, one on either side, they took their prisoner downstairs and out into the courtyard where a car was waiting.

Am I in for a court-martial? he wondered as the vehicle