

PAGE 7

CHAPTER I

As I glance back over the time-shadowed sky of my infancy, I seem to see a vast expanse of mist that gives no light to any early events. But here and there looms a faint pyramid of recollection that can apparently never fade. Toward them I grope, almost in a twilight of memory, seeking to bring out what really happened to me while I passed through the little world of inevitable childhood and poverty. My first real recollection probably runs down to a little less than four years -- for my grandmother died then. And I clearly remember when she made me go up to the garret to get onions in order to have them roasted under hot cinders of the wood fire that we used in place of a stove. It undoubtedly must have been winter, for it is in winter that such things are properly in use.

She said, "Get the onions from under the bed, and we will roast and eat them."

So I began to climb the stepladder, hesitating. She climbed half the way up speaking words of encouragement. One of the chief causes for my fear at that time was that the garret had no window and the only light that came in was what penetrated through the cracks of the tile roof. I was also frightened at the horrible dragging noise of a caravan of

was no serious trouble, only a little scratch the child must have received when the big boy threw him down.

Instinctively I sobbed out, like a lamb that answers the bleating call of its mother.

I ran on. Soon I reached the half-broken three steps that led up to my house. As I was on the second step I felt a rough hand grab my shoulder and lips shouting in my ear.

I trembled and howled. My mother's voice uttered sharply, "Let him go! You know he has done nothing."

It was that boy's oldest brother who had caught me and had shouted to frighten me, probably as a compensation for what I had been accused of doing to his brother.

Sullenly the tall young man answered, "Don't be afraid, I am only fooling." And to me, "You didn't do anything to him, otherwise I would have searched you out no matter where you had hidden."

Overjoyed, with assured innocence, I entered the house in one leap.

And my mother smiled after me.

CHAPTER II

The hamlet where I was born on January 20, 1894, is comprised of a small group of stone houses near Introdacqua and not very far from the old walled city of Sulmona. Introdacqua nestles at the head of a beautiful valley whose soft green is walled in by the great blue barracks of Monte Majella. The mother mountain looms to the east of us and receives the full splendor of the dawn. We are proud to call ourselves the sons of the majestic Majella. And our race, the ancient Samnites, is said to have sprung from those sunny altitudes and spread their power over all Italy, making even Rome tremble.

Few roads run to this quiet land and the old traditions have never entirely died out there. Below the town is the garden of Ovid with wild roses and cool springs, and above is an ancient castle that in summer is fantastically crowned with mingling flights of wild pigeons that take care of their younglings on its towered heights. In the valley beyond are finely cultivated fields dotted with the ruins of Italica, the capital of fierce Samnium.

One day, when I was about six, my mother had to go to the town, which was a little more than "half an hour's walk" away. Childishly, I insisted on going with her.

games and escapades dear to the hearts of boys. But when the excessive work of spring and harvest time was over, then I would pasture my sheep up on the mountains that I loved. And I had no cares, and I would sing to myself, pausing perhaps to hear my own echo descending upon me.

The inspiration of Monte Majella above me, I later sought to express in a poem, which after many vicissitudes was finally printed in *The Nation*:

The mountain in a prayer of questioning heights
 gazes upward at the dumb heavens,
 And its inner anger is forever bursting forth
 In twisting torrents.
 Like little drops of dew trickling along the crevices
 Of this giant questioner
 I and my goats were returning toward the town
 below.
 But my thoughts were of a little glen where wild
 roses grow
 And cool springs bubble up into blue pools.
 And the mountain was insisting for an answer from
 the still heaven.

CHAPTER III

There is a continuous stream of beggars from strange places that passes through our town. Especially during festive days when they crowd the entrances of Introdacqua. And it seems that many of them find it so pleasant and the people so generous that they make a sort of permanent abode in our midst. Yet the givers themselves are very poor, though rich in kindness. What alms they hand out consist mostly of pieces of bread, a cutting of salted pork or a plate of soup. And usually they add a glass or two of the best wine in the house, with sincere impartiality.

This vast tribe of human derelicts is mostly composed of cripples, lame creatures hardly able to struggle along, and those struck by disease or by absolute poverty. Into this sad torrent there has intrusively entered a more evil element, namely, those who play on the superstitions and fear of the simple countrypeople. So we find witches, vampires and wizards demanding food and respect from the poor peasants and getting it.

Like a dark promontory of fright overshadowing a craving sea of beggars, loomed a strange woman in our town. She had come from the weird barrens of the mountains, before I was born, and had made her home among us. She was gazed at, but scarcely

Pattering on the velvet floor of gloom –
The moon!

The moon is a faint, memory of a lost sun –

The moon is a footprint that the Sun has left on
pathless heaven!

Pearl-gray wings are whirling distantly –
Whirling!

A fever of youth streams through my being

Trembling under the incantation of Beauty,

Like a turmoil of purple butterfly caught in a web
of light.

A black foam of darkness overflows from the rim of
night,

And floods away the pearl-gray wings!

CHAPTER IV

One evening, when I was fifteen, I found my mother crying softly but bitterly. As soon as I entered our hut she wiped her eyes and tried to assume a calm expression. To my repeated questions she shook her head. I asked where my father was. She pointed out toward the fields.

It was swiftly getting dark. A few dim lights began to show here and there in the village. And on the road before our house the richer peasants were returning on their slow donkeys through the vast gloom. My father had none, for we were far too poor to own any.

Again I looked at my mother. She was leaning her arm on the narrow window sill with her chin between her fingers. Under her raven black hair, her face appeared pale in the dim glow of twilight. Almost everybody we knew had already passed on their way home. The bells rang distantly.

I was alarmed, especially at her ominous silence for I knew that my mother was not a woman to show much visible signs of emotion. No woman who works harder than most men out in the fields tilling the soil can do that. I had been helping a neighbor at harvest for two cents a day. She was here alone without either my father or my younger brother.

I did not answer. I bowed my head lower and lower.

Sobbing, she threw her arms about me and pressed me to her breast. In the darkness of her tight embrace, eyes closed, I wept. We both wept there on the steps. She kissed my lips again and again. Her warm tears fell on my face. I was sobbing, "I will return soon, we will return soon." But no. Her mother's fears foretold the truth. I never returned. Again she embraced me, as she did when she would cradle me to sleep on her breast. Again she kissed me. And so we remained for a long, long while until a tranquil peace came upon us.

"Children are like birds after big strong wings have grown and enabled them to fly, very seldom they think of returning back home to the mother's bough. I know! I know!"

CHAPTER V

Quickly we set about making plans for leaving. My father had wished to take me along even before my decision, but hated to separate me from my mother, though he thought of me all the time. Nor did he oppose my desire to accompany him.

My mother, soon resigned, began to make us various pairs of socks, both of cotton and of wool shorn from our neighbor's lambs. Another man in the hamlet had also decided to go. He had been married for about two years and had great ambitions and little money. As the first move he went to town and bought himself a substantial valise.

His wife was a very beautiful woman with a temper rather stronger than the average. With multitudinous tears she steadily refused to do anything for her husband, hoping to hold him back by her unpreparedness. But he had decided and tears and spite were of no avail. Realizing this she began later on, with a quicker pace, to prepare all the articles he might need.

We heard of many others in the town who were leaving. Some of them had rich *compari* and relatives. Dinners were being given in their honor before their departure. As for us, we were growing more and more eager each day. There was still work for

ther and son. Upright and straight, they were both glaring at a newspaper which the father held. With compassion, I observed that they were both afflicted with some nervous disease, for their mouths were in continuous motion, like cows chewing cud. "Too bad," I thought, "that both father and son should be afflicted in the same way!"

The foreman was anxious, pulling out a watch continually and saying that we had barely time to catch a train for our final destination. So we were not to live in this remarkable place! And now, just before we reached the station, I began to notice that there were signs at the corners of the streets with "Ave.! Ave.! Ave.!" How religious a place this must be that expresses its devotion at every crossing, I mused. Still, they did not put the "Ave." before the holy word, as, in "Ave Maria," but rather after. How topsy-turvy!

What confusion greeted us at the station! We hurried through a vast turning crowd and dashed down toward a train. Almost before realizing it, we were speeding toward our destination, Hillsdale, where work was ready for us on the state road. I was overwhelmed, but pleased.

CHAPTER VI

And this was America, I thought. During our way over on the ship I had seen golden heaps of clouds and rainbow vistas toward which we sped, and I had come to believe that they were perhaps the portals of America.

But this place was out in a forest, a soft murmuring woodland of enormous trees, straight and majestic. In our country large forests are a rarity. And trees were practically all planted by the hands of man. But these giant trees were monuments. And as the sunlight poured through them I felt small and helpless - almost lost.

We went down a coiling mud-road on a truck which had met us at the station. And after a long ride through the woods we came out upon a clearing in the center of which was a small, smoky wooden shack. That was to be our home. We jumped down. A man came to the door. I had heard of him. There several other men, all fellow-townsmen, who were waiting for our arrival to complete the new gang.

It was getting dark in the forest. A golden twilight poured over the trees. Some birds chirped in an ugly voice.

Inside the shack we were setting our things in

CHAPTER VII

My first real view of New York, the first time I actually realized the city, came in the summer of 1914 when I first visited Shady Side. Our job in Tuckahoe, New York, had stopped and I had come as a sort of advance agent for the gang in search of work. I came to the house of a couple of fellow townsmen. They boarded with some other Abruzzese in a shack perched on a high part of the Palisades.

I reached there Friday night. And when Saturday came one of my friends, Saverio, a very experienced man, took me and his companion to see the sights. "You cannot know the great city - not until I show you what it really is," he boasted. This was true, for on my first arrival in America I had hurried through New York as through some wild vision. And the immense powerful city had made little impression upon me. I have seen more gigantic and wonderful things in my dreams.

I had also lived for a few weeks in a cheap boarding house on Bayard Street with the gang when our job at Sparkhill, New York, was finished. But I was green then and my mind was yet unable to gather any impressions of the city, save that it was big, noisy and unintelligible. A dog whose eyes see a wonder-

ful sunset, I suppose, feels about as much as I did at that time.

But a year made a good deal of difference and it was with a broadened vision that I came to Shady Side.

Saverio's companion was called Federico, a bronze-faced lad who had conceived a quick friendship for me in the short time I had been there. Dressed in our best, and looking rather handsome, in our estimation, we left the noisy house and climbed carefully down the face of the precipice on a narrow coiling footpath that leads into Gorge Road.

Gorge Road comes pouring like a stream from the cliffs and joins River Road. Dirty shacks and hovels are everywhere at the foot of the Palisades. On tiny terraces are barn-like houses clinging to the bare, stony slope, one above the other, filled hive-like with people talking, people arguing, people smoking and eating, singing and strumming guitars.

Slowly the last light drew from the strip of sky that glimmered between the cliffs of the Palisades and the looming masses of factories along the black river. Men and women, dirty, speaking a mixed jargon of Italian, Polish, Hungarian, English, were hurrying all about. Two husky laborers were appearing from the gloom of a factory door. One old Italian with golden rings in his ears was prodding some goats upward toward the terraced shacks. Children played everywhere.

"Saverio, my friend, you can't refuse a drink with us!" a voice came from a small shed-like house up

love, like death and night is a great leveller, even in a metropolis.

And we three walked on, wanderers in a magic show of forbidden splendor and beauty. And I thought of how lovely and yet repulsive this enchanted city was.

CHAPTER VIII

My visit to Shady Side was unsuccessful and I returned to my gang in Tuckahoe. Another one of us who had gone looking for a job – I believe it was our gigantic Andrea – succeeded in landing work for us at Ovid, N. Y., near Lake Cayuga. From there we went to New Branford, Conn., Melbourne, Mass. and West Pawlet, Vt. That winter the whole gang was again confronted by a period of idleness. It is always hard to find work for eight or nine men, even in summer. We fellow townsmen in this strange land clung desperately to one another. To be separated from our relatives and friends and to work alone was something that frightened us old and young. So we were ready to undergo a good deal of hardship before we would even consider breaking up the gang.

Nor was our enforced idleness a thing to look at with pleasure. For in that period the tiny sums that we might have been able to save would quickly vanish and we would soon find ourselves in debt.

It was a bad winter and we decided to come to New York from where we would sooner or later find another job. Meanwhile we tried to limit our expenses as much as possible during our enforced sojourn in the city. And naturally we lived in the slums where people of ill repute are not difficult to find.

CHAPTER IX

And still we went around asking for a job. As the weeks passed on our condition became critical. One or two, including Giovanni the hilarious, were past the end of their resources and were approaching a point where they could no longer hope for a loan even from kind-hearted friends. Each one of us went about, seeking work for seven or eight men. But so desperate had we become that we began to consider separating and finding work in several different places. It hurts the conscience of honest people when they have to live on borrowed money. We were ready to go anywhere and one of us even began to talk about Chicago.

One evening when we had the usual gathering to see if anything new had sprung up, Giorgio, the clever talker, who was perhaps our most assiduous searcher seemed to be affected by an unusual sense of humor.

"Work is the easiest thing to find," he began, laughing merrily.

We turned our gloomy downhearted faces toward him.

"What is there to prevent a man from working as hard as he wants?" continued Giorgio.

We really didn't consider it an appropriate occasion for such foolish remarks, and one of us, my father, I think, told him so.

Giorgio straightened up, and with a merry light in his brown eyes, said, "Don't be afraid. I have found a place where we can all resume our labors before the end of the week."

Our eyes brightened. We all shouted at once, "Is it true?" We had doubts when Giorgio said a thing, for he was very rarely serious.

Giorgio swore by all the saints, with his hand over his heart, that the problem of finding a job had been settled by him. He had found the job for us all, and our worries would soon be over.

That night we ate more heartily to celebrate our unexpected luck. What could our celebration consist of? Perhaps adding another soup to our "menu" and a five-cent bottle of beer.

When going to bed, we talked long about the job. Giorgio was not sure where it was except that it was in the south.

"The south?" said Andrea, "that is where oranges grow."

The cold wind was assailing our windows and we thought with awakened pleasure of a warm countryside.

"There are negroes in the south," added another.

My father remarked, "I wonder what the railroad fare will be." The others were unwilling to talk about such an unpleasant thing and turning around under their coverlets began to discuss the more agreeable aspects, such as the climate and the state of vegeta-

name. On introducing himself to us he had seriously told us that anyone who was called Teofilo possessed seven golden blessings in his life. At present, we told him, he had only five blessings left, having already used up two of them, one when he met us, and the other when he escaped damage from the automobile.

Laughingly he answered, "Who knows? I may need all five of them in the place to which we are going."

In the land of summer and flowers? Unnecessary, we told him.

Finally we were in the train speeding through dull winter landscapes toward our new job.

CHAPTER X

It was during the night hours that we got off a local train and stood shivering and confused on a dark platform.

"Can this be the place?" we thought.

An icy sword-like wind assailed us. We shivered. It was bitter cold, worse than New York. And where were the oranges? And where the flowers?

The region was indistinct around us, its hilly distances glimmering faintly with long stretches of wet snow. Inside the small wooden station was a dimly lit room. In a body, we entered and presented our checks to the baggage master.

He shook his head.

There was no baggage for us. Perhaps it would arrive the following day. We were angered at the delay, for in our baggage were our warm quilts and mattress covers that we used to fill with straw or dried leaves on reaching a new place. We would have been considerably more angered at the time had we known where our poor baggage had gone. For there is another town in Pennsylvania also called Williamsport; and the carelessness of the baggage agent in New York had caused our belongings to be sent there.

Out we went, like a flock of sheep in the dark-

were indignantly rejected and the whole gang left in a body. In those days when work was rapidly picking up after a long slump, it was a matter of each man finding the very best he could. My case was typical: a long lay-off the previous year had left me in debt. And now there was a chance of making money. I was lured by the \$2.25 per day promised on the state roads in Northern New Jersey, and went there alone. I spent all the money I had for the fare.

There were many various gangs working in the place: stone-breakers, stone-drillers, excavators, concrete workers and others, each with its own foreman. There were men loading stones of various sizes newly broken, on wagons; steam-rollers puffing along; gangs laying out first large stones, then smaller, and then sand. Over everything they put on tar and a covering of powder which we called "fine stuff."

I succeeded in getting work with the concrete gang. The road was progressing rapidly. There were rivulets over which little concrete bridges were required. Having no mixer for the concrete we had to mix the sand, stones and cement with our shovels right on the spot. And here came some of our hardest work, especially hard, as it was summer. On some of those cloudless days when the sun blazed down on us we would be carrying dusty bags full of heavy cement on our shoulders continuously. The dust mixed with the sweat beneath, burning the shoulders and itching. Very often after I had wiped my cheeks and around my neck with a dirty handkerchief I had to spread it out on the grass to dry while

CHAPTER XI

OMNIS SUM

On the Calvary of thought I knelt, in torment of silence.

The stars were like sparks struck from the busy forge of vengeful night.

The sky was like a woman in fury

Disheveling her tresses of darkness over me.

It seemed as if the whole universe were accusing me
Of the anguish of Deity.

When a laborer leaves one locality for another, he always does so for some fancied betterment and not with the idea of touring the country. There is nothing for him to see. And always, the lure of advantage is changed after the first few days into disillusion and remorse. For wherever he goes there are hovels, hard work and brutal foremen – and that feeling of autocracy over him which he probably never knew before and which makes him bestial and unconsciously fatalistic.

In 1916 while all the other companies were paying good wages our own beloved railroad, the Erie, was persistent in allowing us \$1.50 per day. We asked for \$1.75, which was reasonable and less than what other places paid. But our demands, though honest,

CHAPTER XII

That night I lingered a long time outside the shanty, thinking. And darkness made the vast solitudes of heaven populous with stars.

At first my mind was turbulent.

And I thought to myself, "Why, I am nothing more than a dog. A dog. But a dog is silent and slinks away when whipped, while I am filled with the urge to cry out, to cry out disconnected words, expressions of pain - anything - to cry out!"

I looked around. I felt a kinship with the beautiful earth. She was like some lovely hardhearted lady in velvets and gaudy silks - one whom we could gaze at in admiration, but never dare approach. I felt a power that was forcing me to cry out to this world that was so fair, so soft and oblivious of our pains and petty sorrows. Then I had to laugh to myself. "After all," I thought, "what are my tiny woes to the eternal beauty of those stars, of these trees and even this short-lived grass?"

For a long time I paced the soft green in front of our shanty. Then I entered. The men inside were grumbling mournfully to one another, barely visible in the gloom. I had resigned myself to my fate. I was a poor laborer - a dago, a wop or some such creature - in the eyes of America. Well, what could I do?

Nothing.

Thereafter, for a long while until my numbed soul was again awakened, my prime interests were food and jobs. First of all I had to escape back to headquarters in New York. My credit was very bad.

I left the shanty with a couple of others; and we began to trudge aimlessly down the long road. At several farmhouses we paused to ask for work. None of the farmers seemed to care to give us any.

"What are you going to do?" asked a young bright-faced lad.

"Walk," grumbled my other companion, a Sicilian.

And walk we did. That night we slept in a most beautiful country side. But the mosquitoes and the gathering damp prevented our admiring the splendor of the broad starlit night.

Rising a little stiff-jointed the next morning we walked on. We were hungry; for a drink of water at a clear spring had not done much to soothe us. We had a little money between us, and on reaching a placid hamlet nestled amid soft green hills we made a quick run on the general store.

And who should be conducting the store but a *paisano* of mine! We shook hands long and vigorously and in a few minutes I was giving him a detailed account of everything that had passed in our village from the time he had come to America to the day, years later, when I left.

This good fellow-townsmen of mine made the three of us sleep in his house that night. In real beds,

Such reveries were always broken by a rough shout from some of my fellow laborers to "come in and go to sleep!"

CHAPTER XIII

During the summer of 1919 I began to hear much about *Aïda*, but I did not know exactly what it was. Federico up on Hudson Heights had been to see it; but he was unable to tell me much about it except that there was a fine parade in it.

About the same time I happened to glance over an Italian newspaper and saw an advertisement that this opera was to be represented in the open air at the Sheephead Bay race track. I decided to go and hear it. I went there by asking my way right and left, for I knew nothing about the intricacies of Brooklyn.

And there in the middle of the confusion that attended the performance, I succeeded in worming my way to a seat right next to the orchestra, where my ears were eloquently feasted.

And all at once I felt myself being driven toward a goal. For there was revealed to me beauty, which I had been instinctively following, in spite of my grotesque jokes and farces. The quality of beauty that is in *Aïda* I have found only in the best of Shelley and perhaps Keats. There were parts of such overwhelming loveliness that they tore my soul apart. At times, afterwards, when on the job amid the confusion of running engines, car screams, and all kinds of bad

everything I had written up to that time. Jokes, disjointed scenes and humorous "poems" all went into the cleansing flame.

I had an enormous knowledge of disjointed words and phrases and my mind was filled with fantastic impressions of life. It was hard for me to put my words and thoughts in order. Grammar gave me plenty of trouble. Rhyme stumped me. Avidly I read all kinds of poetry, during my spare time, and discovered that rhyme was not absolutely essential to poetic utterance. I also discovered, very early in my career, that a good deal of what goes under the name of poetry is really trash. So from the first I tried to avoid echoing the things I had read, and be on the safe side.

Meanwhile I became the cause of considerable argument among my fellow-workers. Some maintained that my knowledge of English would help me to advance in this world and others insisted that a man who was born a laborer could never rise. The most hopeful among them would predict that I might succeed - eventually becoming a foreman! I wonder what they would have thought had they known that I was slowly but surely deciding upon a literary career!

One of the newer men in my gang, Felice, an old man who had been strong in his youth but was now a physical wreck, told me one day:

"Pascal, what hope is there for any laborer in this world? Look at me: besides being an illiterate, I am as you see me. I walk like a duck; with a deformed

CHAPTER XIV

I cannot think of the old box car without a feeling of regret. It was a wonderful place for studying the ways of insects. Whenever it rained, water streamed in on all sides. But it was cosy; we had a fine big stove and plenty of coal which we picked up from the ground after quitting time.

New men were hired; some merry old fellows came to live in the box car. Life had taken on a lively aspect. Yet I was dissatisfied. For I had been thrilled by a new discovery - my senses were all atremble - I had found Shelley.

I had already learned that there was a public library nearby in Edgewater. Going there, I was kindly received in spite of my broken English and the ragged appearance of my working clothes. And it was there that, while browsing among books, I finally wandered upon "Prometheus Unbound." In a flash I recognized an appealing kinship between the climaxes of *Aida* and the luminous flights of that divine poetry.

Again I felt an urge to express myself, to cry out my hopes and dreams to this lovely unheeding world. Music was impossible for me; but Shelley I could proceed to emulate almost immediately. As soon as I returned to the box car I burned almost

each, but twenty-five, and sometimes even more, for a nickel. These were not daily occurrences, only Saturdays made them possible. One can easily imagine in what state of decomposition they were to fetch such a low price. For me, in my struggle against poverty, they were a rare delicacy. A banana vendor once, the first time I approached his stand, asked me, "Are you buyin' this bananas for your dog?"

"No," I replied promptly, "for my 'wolf.'"

Several times on my way home with soup I would begin to tremble – and there was a good reason for it – for if the Prohibition agents ever inspected my soup they would arrest me. Because my soup, in its state of fermentation, would far surpass their constitutionalized one-half of one per cent. Sometimes besides being sour and burnt – at times so badly damaged that I had to throw it away and bemoan the nickel which I had lost in that bad investment – my soup was full of bones – bones that did not belong there. Meatless bones, chicken feet which were dead, but alive enough to scratch my soul with deep humiliation. But the more things turned against me, the more I stood my ground.

I had faith in myself. Without realizing it, I had learned the great lesson of America: I had learned to have faith in the future. No matter how bad things were, a turn would inevitably come – as long as I did not give up. I was sure of it. But how much I had to suffer until the change came! What a thorny, heart-breaking road it was!

CHAPTER XV

As the winter grew more severe my condition became desperate. My books and papers were mouldering from the damp. I too felt that I was mouldering. The sufferings, colds, wet and damp were beginning to harm me. Many a freezing night, unable to remain in bed I had to get up and walk about three miles to the Long Island Depot at Flatbush Avenue where I might find a little warmth.

Once I had to stay three days without washing because the lavatory pipes were frozen. On the morning of the fourth day I thought it was worthwhile going to the Main Library at Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue where I could wash not only my hands and face but my handkerchief also.

I took some stale bread with me and five or six bananas, because that was all I had left. Wrapping the remainder of the bread, destined to last at least two more days, in a sheet of newspaper; I threw it under the bed. Usually, on going out, I would place my bread on the bed rather than under, fearing lest the unwelcome toilet overflows would pay a visit during my absence and render it uneatable. But now that the pipes were frozen I needed no such precautions.

While I was in the public library, several hours later, I had occasion to go from the main reading