

# Viva the Referendum!

(Written for "The Listener" by  
J. S. HEPBURN)



ITALY has voted herself a republic. The referendum came out to a neat, pat answer—millions for, fewer millions against. But, of course, it wasn't a neat, pat answer. They don't have neat, pat answers in Italy—they have demonstrations, volubility, and slogans written on walls. They also have too little bread.

I read about the voting, the decision and then the demonstrations, and I thought again of Lilliana Cassana. Lilliana Cassana, with the large, long-lashed, dark eyes and the child's mouth, who worked 12 hours a day in a printery in Bari. She was 15 then, perhaps nearly 16, but not yet a woman as many Southern girls are. Her ungrown body told the same tale of past under-nourishment as did her ill-made, flimsy, and none-too-clean black dress of present poverty. Perhaps it was because she was small and slender that her legs seemed somehow sturdy where the knees were bare above the half-length woollen stockings. Her arms were thin, her hands roughened and dirt-seamed and there was dried bindery paste on them, and on her dress, too. In her face was something of childhood and much of care. The poverty-pallor accentuated the large, near-black eyes which lifted so slowly, and then fell so quickly if you looked into them.

they had worked 11 hours and dawn was near. For all of them the future was babies and bread—not monarchies and republics, but babies and bread.

Yet they were the strength of Italy. Somewhere in those girls was thin, hard steel. Their soldiers straggled, unshaven, through the streets of Bari as they marched to and from their work on the wharves, but the girls sang an hour before dawn and sometimes they earned more money than their fathers. Lilliana had that quality of endurance, that tenacity. It didn't come from the Fascism under which she was born and which gave her undernourishment; and it wasn't extinguished by war. Dictatorship and democracy had less to do with it than those little dialect songs.

THAT was in Southern Italy, in the winter of 1944. Lilliana earned more money than her father. She worked for the British Army and he was a railway man. But it still took them a long time to add up to a loaf of bread. It took just a little longer than it took to eat the previous loaf—always it took that little time longer and there were four other children to feed. There was rationed bread, but the ration was too meagre and the black-market bread was too dear. A year before they had written on walls "Viva il Duce" and eaten black bread; now they wrote "Viva i Popoli" and ate brown bread, but there was still that gap. And the children had distended stomachs and no chests.

Lilliana didn't write on walls. She worked, sometimes all day and sometimes all night, and she prayed for her two elder brothers. One was in a labour battalion in Germany and one was dead. She also prayed for her "fidanzato," her fiancé, and asked shyly when he would come back from the prison camp in Egypt. I thought of the ragged, spiritless Italian prisoners, the remnant Fascist army, and I said it would be a long time. I supposed he would come back and then it would be babies for Lilliana and again the bread cycle wherein the ends never quite meet.

BABIES and bread. Lilliana knew that her life would be babies and bread, but still she sang while she worked. They all sang, the 200 girls in the printery, little dialect songs, rippling little songs with words that had no meaning 20 miles from Bari. They sang even after

THERE are many Lilliana Cassanas in Southern Italy. They wear black dresses and coarse woollen stockings which leave knees bare. They pray for their brothers who are dead and they know this simple truth: That governments are something to write about on walls and bread is something to eat.

When the nation voted itself a republic the people of the South must have voted, too. I am glad, because it is good that a people should express its will. It makes hardly any difference to me, now, whether Italy is a republic or a monarchy—but there is still that troubling little thought that it also makes hardly any difference to Lilliana Cassana.

ANGELA PARSELLES is a musician who sings; she is also a singer who is musical. For her, the voice is the servant of heart and mind, something much more than a mere vehicle for vulgar exhibitionism. On June 22, 1YA relayed from the Auckland Town Hall the first group of a request programme, comprising some early Italian songs. These were sung with the right combination of warmth and detachment, the warmth implied in the polished phrasing, and in the sympathetic and clear enunciation. Pergolesi's "Tre giorni," which usually receives perfunctory treatment from sopranos, was infused with new life, but the opening Monteverdi "Lasciatemi morire" set the standard. Miss Parselles' voice is not altogether free from wobble and she has an occasional tendency to push her chest notes up too far, with a consequent deterioration in quality and intonation. These faults, however, hardly detract from the enjoyment of singing imaginatively expressed through sincere musicianship.

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