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FISH-AND-CHIPS AU ITALIEN

*A Timely Reminder
that, Forces being
Equal, it is Not Always
the Italian who
Retreats*

Written for "The Listener"
by M.B.

WHEN they first heard we were shifting to another suburb, our neighbours expressed conventional regret. "But one good thing about B—," said Mrs. Jones. "There's an excellent fish-and-chips shop just down the tramline, run by a man called Georgetti. An Italian. Used to be chef at the Piccadilly in London, so they say. That is, of course, if you're interested in fish-and-chips."

I remembered Mrs. Jones's words the day we moved, as I stood in the middle of an alien kitchen and tried to remember where I'd packed the cutlery. I couldn't remember, but I remembered Georgetti, and the fact that you eat fish-and-chips with your fingers.

THE outside of Mr. Georgetti's shop was no different from the outside of anybody else's fish-and-chip shop. No mention of the Piccadilly. Not even a little notice saying "This shop is run by Free Yugoslavs" and two flags crossed. Not, of course, that there would be any need for that now when, if one can believe the papers, Italians are fighting side by side with the liberating Allies against the common foe. Still with all the other shops gaily decked with bunting, Mr. Georgetti's window, with just the one limp flounder, struck an alien note. Evidently a man of character.

But of unprepossessing character. The inside of the shop was dark and smoky. Through the gloom it was just



Mr. Georgetti's face took on an even more forbidding expression

possible to distinguish on the far wall a copy of the Fish Shop Assistants' Award, somewhat fly-spotted. But immediately facing the customer above the counter two notices shrieked for attention, "Bring Your Own Wrapping," and "Do Not Ask for Credit: A Refusal May Offend." My heart lurched sickeningly downwards, then returned thankfully to its normal position, when I remembered the large sheet of brown paper round my knitting, still at the bottom of my shopping bag. And I *did* have at least one-and-sixpence.

JUST as well, for Mr. Georgetti himself had unaccountably materialised beside the empty and still silent frying vats. Black shirt (no political significance, I hoped), off-white apron, smouldering eyes, and the cast of feature one associates with his great fellow-countryman of Chicago fame, "Legs" Diamond.

"Shilling's worth of fish-and-chips, please."

A flick of the wrist, and flames heightened beneath the vat. Softly, sinisterly, the fat began to hiss. Contemptuously, he tossed the fish and chips into the basket, the basket into the fat. The silence grew long between us.

"Have you," I began desperately, "any fresh fish?"

Mr. Georgetti flicked an embittered thumb towards the window. The solitary flounder, tried to wilt still further into its enamel tray.

"No schnapper?"

"No whitebait?"

"No oysters?"

In face of my persistence Mr. Georgetti's face took on an even more forbidding expression. His voice, heard now for the first time, had a hissing undertone, borrowed, perhaps unconsciously, from the fat.

"I am expected to run a fish-shop, but I can get no fish. When I can get fish I have to pay two shillings a pound for it, and then what customers would I get for fish at half-a-crown a pound? So I do not buy fish. How do they expect me to make a living?"

He leaned across the counter. His eyes glared into mine. The fat in the pan gave a sudden vicious plop, and the small fountain shot up to sprinkle afresh the notices about credit and wrapping. Now that I had met Mr. Georgetti, I felt that the "may" of the second notice could well be altered to a more definite "will."

MR. GEORGETTI turned to the basket, gave it a nonchalant shake, then faced me again to hiss "There's something wrong with the way this country's run."

The words "No one could say your own was any model," rose to my lips, but retired in disorder beneath the withering fire of Mr. Georgetti's beady eye, seen through the thickening blue haze of frying smoke. Anyway, I still had one more request.

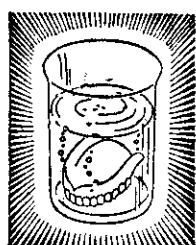
"You wouldn't," I began ingratiatingly, "have any scraps of fish suitable for a cat?"

Contempt dimmed the angry fire of his eye. "Scraps for a cat? I tell you I can't even get scraps for my own customers!" He flounced from the shop, leaving me regarding the contents of the basket with some concern.

The slam of a door and Mr. Georgetti was back, flinging two fish-heads into the middle of a newspaper sheet. Timidly I manoeuvred my knitting from its wrapping and slid the chaste brown sheet across the counter. But Mr. Georgetti was too quick for me. The basket was jerked from the vat, and its contents avalanched greasily over the fish-heads. The brown paper lay on the counter between us, as disregarded as an expired tote-ticket. Flicking it aside, Mr. Georgetti seized another sheet of newspaper and bundled up the smoking mass. From the outside of the paper headlines shouted "Fall of Italy." The fat in the pan gave a vicious heave, and fresh billows of smoke rose to the ceiling.

I slid a shilling and a threepence across the counter.

(Continued on next page)



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