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THE DANGER MONTHS ARE STILL AHEAD

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MOLLY WAS RIGHT!

Peggy: "He said the M.T. was the smartest."

Molly: "He must mean Military Tan."



Also
Dark Tan,
Blue,
Black,
etc.

WE had been slowly winding upward in bottom gear among the soft green curves of olive-sprinkled hills when unexpectedly my husband stood on the pedals and yelled "Vesuvio!" Seeing over his shoulder as we suddenly tilted over the last crest, I too beheld the plain stretching to the horizon with at its far faint end a tiny purple cone and filmy wisp of smoke. But "Napoli!" was my triumphant cry, the town towards which we had been circuitously cycling across Europe for the last three months.

Midday we cooked pasta and tomatoes in a reaped cornfield, fascinatedly watching from eucalyptus shade that ever-varying funnel of volcanic cloud, now nearer and denser. Mid-afternoon we passed through ancient Capua which "destroyed Roman garrisons by its luxury faster than our enemies could by arms." (I quote Livy from memory—no luxury was visible to us.) Thereafter we were in a region of hemp-bleaching ponds whose stink made tenting for the night impossible. Then came Aversa, a regular town—also impossible. And from Aversa to Naples we pedalled in mid-evening down a marvellous avenue of trees, but so thickly gardened on either side that never a place to pitch could we discover. Hotels, I had better explain, were banned for us: only twice in Europe had soaking ground, and once dense population, forced us to spend good money on beds. But here riding ever deeper into fading daylight and tall tenements it looked like happening again. The triumphal entry foretasted since Boulogne was turning in realisation into an uncomfortable fiasco.

"BICYCLETTA! Bicycletta!" shrieked a roadside group of Neapolitan youths, running for their own machines. When they overtook us we explained our plight in that mixture of French and Latin that had carried us right through Italy. One waved us forward enthusiastically, held up the procession before a 16-foot barbed-wire gate, handed us over to the *bersagliero* on guard, and virtuously faded away.

Inside were acres of flying-field to be negotiated and a rising succession of officers. Each had in turn to be told our request for tenting space. Each in turn beamed and effused as it got home to him. And each finally held us waiting as he sent soldiers scurrying round to find the next man up. And when in the end, our last precious daylight squandered, the Great Chief High Supreme Camp Commandante himself gave the curt refusal which apparently only we had all along known he must, still we were not allowed to leave. But at last he was disinterested—the searched-for speaker-of-English—and lengthily explained to us the obvious. Hope many times deferred and now extinguished with the daylight had made us bold. "Your people have lost us all chance of finding a camp. You find us one" we demanded.

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ONLY for a moment is a Neapolitan ever confounded. "Park," he stammered, pointing across a busy street intersection to where some Mediterranean palms appeared, green and restful, over a grimy plaster wall—"Park public... come... police... permission." "Permission" was obtained, and joined now by the "police" himself, we pushed over to before the wall. But it was blank! "The gate... la porte... porta?" we asked. He looked as incomprehending as the wall itself, then puzzled, then suspicious, then violent as my husband made the gesture of clambering over. Angrily he seized his shoulders and pointed to the bare clay around us. Those American movies again! Our park was a "car park!"

"No matter," we apologised. "Troppo duro: troppo dust: troppo populo: troppo noise: too much everything. We will ride back into the country" (Though where?)

"But no. My authority is that you sleep here," he indicated emphatically. My husband left me and the bicycles and stepped the few yards to the further clay triangle. All followed—the policeman and the dense heart of the crowd that by now was spreading out into the traffic itself. Then "On! Off!" he shouted bounding back. The gendarme had not got his whistle into his open mouth for gesticulations and surprise before we had vanished up the nearest street, one empty and unlit.

* * *

SO so far so so. But our original problem of camping space remained more urgent and less hopeful than ever. Then just where lighted city streets began again we spied a cart-way vanishing between buildings: and, up the track—what marvellous luck—was the black profile of a tiny straw stack. Under the electric light behind it we spied as we approached a group of young people in black dresses or white singlets lounging round the steps of a peeling plaster building. "Perpiachere, signor, permissio struere nostra tenda qui" we tumbled out our usual formula as we burst upon them,



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snatching our tent off, unpacking, and starting to erect it at their very feet, trusting that interest in the proceedings might lead to goodwill. We need not have worried. Both already were ours. Young women and girls flooding out of the surrounding square houses had engulfed me to incapacity. "How old are you? Where did you come from? Are you married? Then where are your children? Don't you feel cold in these clothes—he-he, clothes?"

They knelt round my calves, tugged my shorts, stroked my thighs, pinched my bare arms, peeped down the neck of my yellow airtex shirt from Vienna, passed round my beret, smoothed my fairish hair, patted my cheeks; laughing, chattering, giggling at this visitor from Mars like excited monkeys.

BUT when at last, my husband having erected our tent on the waves of an old potato patch, I started to prepare our meal they vied with each other in fetching gifts of water, cheese, salt, wine. One practically pushed us into the comparative privacy and state of her bed-sitting-living - room - fowlhouse - kitchen and proudly kept up through the inch-open door a running commentary of our dining to the envious rabble outside. (She profits most who serves most.) Then, not to rob the world of so much potential joy, we washed with unnecessary elaborateness, and *perpiachere* sang for our supper. "Miaow! Miaow!" they chorused at the close, not criticising our voices as we at first supposed, but imagining that they recognised one Italian word in "Vair me O..." And at "Santa Lucia" sung by Martians their enthusiasm and assistance knew no bounds of Neapolitan belch and blare. We already knew that ducks and Italians call for water identically. But that night eardrums and the last traces of our English illusion that Italian is a musical language were finally shattered.

* * *

WE lived amphibiously in Naples like everywhere else—as one does when travelling on many introductions and little money. The proletarians of this slum where we stayed till our ship left were one world. To it also belonged the folk with whom we tried to sleep through the blinding midday heats stretched out on the waterfront park benches. But only South Italians can do that with success. Among the miniature parks' few blades of grass, on the seashore rocks, in shady corners between tall buildings, or even stretched, head only shaded, on the burning concrete of the pavements,

(continued on next page)