THE COMPANIONS OF SILENCE

PROLOGUE: THE SEVEN IRON RINGS

I. The Martorello

There was once a terrestrial paradise. Pythagoras, the son of those fortunate lands, called them the garden of the world. It was Magnia Graecia, bathed by three seas: Daunia, where Horace was born; Lucania, where Hannibal dealt a terrible blow to Roman power at the Battle of Cannes; and also Apulia and Campania, where the same Hannibal went to sleep delightfully on his bed of roses and laurels. From Parthenope to Sybaris, from Sumo, the fatherland of Ovid, to Drepana, at the very tip of Sicily, favorable Ceres spared humans the labor of the fields. Flowers and fruits grew without cultivation. Nowadays, it is known as the Kingdom of Naples and the Two Sicilies. By searching hard, Hannibal would find the wherewithal to reconstitute the delights of Capua; but Ceres, dethroned, no longer protects the idleness of those peoples.

There has been something akin to a great chastisement. The luxurious bark that covered the earth of Calabria has been violently ripped; a wind of ruination has blown, leaving adorable oases here and there in the desolate countryside, as if to intensify the regret of the disinherited sons of the fortunate for the splendors of the lost Eden. Thus, when the scourge of war has passed over an illustrious city, a few columns remain standing, escaping the stupid club of the Cyclops, and those debris of bronze or marble suffice for thought to reconstruct the glorious past.

It is said that on one winter evening in the year 1783, the earth began to render profound and unusual sounds; a veil of blood covered the sky and the serene seas that bathed the gulfs of southern Italy experienced a long frisson. The earth trembled thirteen times between sunset and sunrise. In the black night, Etna and Vesuvius blazed like two sinister beacons confronting one another across space. The next day, the Tyrrhenian Sea, the Ionian Sea and the Adriatic were covered in debris. You might have thought that an immense whirlwind departing from the plateaux of Abruzzo had passed over Italy, uprooting cities and forests. Calabria, the region of Otranto, the Basilicata, and the principal cities were disrupted from top to bottom. Thinking that he had had a hideous dream, the city-dweller searched for his native city and no longer found it. The villager tried in vain to recognize the field that he had sown the day before. Centenarian forests were felled and flattened like frail stems of wheat over which a hurricane had passed. Strange vapors gushed from the disemboweled earth; rivers had changed their beds; entire towns had disappeared, of which nothing remains but the name.

Those idle peoples are easily cowed. After that, on both sides of the Apennines, there was a lugubrious discouragement. The laborer lay down on the edge of his ravaged field. Priests came to preach the crusade of toil. Momentarily, the Italians were seen to be gripped by a laborious fever—which is a miracle—but the plow had hardly traced new furrows, and quarried stone had scarcely marked out a few feet of the enclosure of a reconstituted house, when the mountain uttered its cry of distress for a second time. The level of the sea, unusually, suddenly rose by twenty-four feet and covered plains that had never felt the sea breeze.

There was a prince who governed the town of Scylla, opposite Charybdis on the Sicilian coast. He left his palace and boarded his ships with his entire court. But in the same way that the voyager, if ancient

poetry can be believed, once could not flee through that redoubtable pass the death that came from the right and the left alike, as avoided Scylla sent its victims to Charybdis, the earth and the sea, two enemies, united that day against condemned humanity. The palace was destroyed, the fleet was smashed; the prince perished with fifteen hundred of his subjects.

And since that day, although the Mediterranean has returned to the profundities of its bed, the land of Italy, epileptic and dilapidated, has had periodic grand mal seizures. Three thousand shocks were felt in the four years that followed, which represents more than two quakes per twenty-four hours. Bottomless lakes formed in places where there had been towns. Not far from Oppido, a round hole can be seen that seems to have been produced by a prodigious cannonball launched from the sky. Around the rim of the gulf, the earth is split in a star-shape, like a window that a bullet has traversed.

The Apennine range is strong. It resisted for a long time, but in the end, the strata slipped in large areas and, suddenly stripping the flesh from the colossus, exposed the somber granite of its bones. After four years, that poor beautiful land, exhausted and vanquished, fell asleep; it will sleep for a long time. Half a century gone by has not enabled the gigantic scars of those wounds to disappear.

The southern part of the Bay of Sant'Eufemia, situated in second ulterior Calabria facing the Aeolian isles, forms a beautiful semi-circular beach, the curve of which, seen from the open sea, recalls exactly the idea of the antique amphitheater. There are a few fishermen's huts there, as gray as the rock that shelters them. In the morning, from the dark blue of the sea, one can see the lateen sails of half a dozen boats standing out. The long antenna sustains the triangular sail, and you might think from a distance that it was the elongated wingspan of some great sea bird. Sometimes, the steamer that provides the ferry service between Naples and Palermo goes past, leaving its long plume of smoke behind.

From the beach, where the golden sand is mixed with a brown dust that resembles pulverized lava, one perceives, when the sky is clear, a dark patch in the middle of the Tyrrhenian Sea. That is Stromboli, the southernmost of the Liparian islands, where the famous brigand Fra Diavolo hid, it is said, for nearly a year. From the southern coast the view is limited by Capo Vaticano. To the north, there are the heights of Pizzo, where Murat as executed in October 1815. The landscape is beautiful, but it speaks of solitude and sadness. One experiences there something of the sentiment that grips the heart while passing through ruins. And yet there are no ruins. The circular stretch of sand rounds out its immense curve.

Here and there, a young woman with a bold stride descends the path that rises to firm ground with a pitcher on her shoulder. The weary song of fishermen extending their nets on the beach arrives, and sometimes, in a calm, a felucca lowering its sails in order to ship its oars, sends the rhythmic song of the Sicilian oarsmen to the shore. In the evening, if the breeze is fresh, a slender tartan suddenly bounds forward on the curt waves and attacks the coast with crazy temerity. Night falls. In the distance, in the direction of Capo Vaticano, where the customs officers are, rifle-shots are heard. The tartan returns to Lipari. The contraband is ashore.

Toward the center of the curve, the Brentola, which has its source above Monteleone, opens on to the sands and goes to scatter its course in thousands of slender threads of water. It was on the Brentola that the *cavalieri ferrai*—the blacksmith cavaliers—of the Martorello once labored before the restoration of 1815.

There are no ruins visible along that shore, but there are memories. The Martorello is a rather wide valley that arrives obliquely at the beach through a narrow gorge, where the Brentola cuts through the little chain of rocks. From the shore one does not perceive the Martorello unless one is placed exactly in front of that gap.

A customs post built in blocks of stone stands on the cliff that is within it. The other corner is covered with vegetal earth. A few dwarf fig trees, myrtles and wild lemon trees form a small clump surmounted by the large trunks of two green oaks. That copse is known along the coast and forms a reference point for mariners.

A cart track, collapsed in many places, passes between the left bank of the Brentola and the crag on which the customs post is situated. It turns abruptly, like the river itself, and plunges into the valley in the midst of virgin terrains where, in the background, rice is sown, and, at the summit of the folds, odorous mustard. Five hundred paces from the defile, where several traces of a barrage can be found, the two piles

of a wooden bridge whose apron has disappeared and a few items of debris are bogged down in a marsh of sorts.

The river has made this place its own, finishing off and dissimulating the ravages that the work of man has made. Swollen by the barrage, it has taken possession of the location where the most beautiful forge in Calabria, and perhaps in Italy, once stood. That marsh is exactly where the buildings were that were destroyed and razed to the grounds in the epoch of the disasters of 1815.

Nearly a hundred families were dispersed and transported, some to Sicily to the Val di Demo, the others to the principalities. The family dwellings, constructed in wood for the most part, were burned.

There are no ruins to testify to that destruction either, for the stone foundations of those humble dwellings were buried a long time ago in the brambles and the long grass. The new population, composed of mountain men from the north-eastern slopes of the Apennines, knows almost nothing about the history of the former inhabitants of the region. The environs of the forge, invaded by the waters, have been deserted. What was called the village, a group of between fifteen and twenty huts, was situated much further to the south, beyond the road that leads from Monteleone to Messina. There was only a single building there in 1822, made of wood and marble debris, occupied by an old woman nearly a hundred years old.

It is said in the regions that spirits haunt the ruins hidden under the grass. Even though old Berta had lost all her children years ago, and lived alone in her poor cabin, songs had been heard coming from her door, when it stood ajar. And often, a light ran along the river in the middle of the night, while a hoarse voice called out a name that no one was able to make out. What is certain is that the waters, always coming nearer and nearer, had soaked that land, which was cracked, as if chapped, by volcanic shocks, over a wide area.

That new marsh, the fermentations of which operated at great depths, brooded malaria in spite of the proximity of the coast. The malaria, whose hearth was probably in the very ruins of the forge, extended into the distance and desolated the entire region. On Sunday, when the bells of the convent of the Corpo-Santo announced the morning mass, there was a procession of phantoms climbing the hill.

A Neapolitan mile from the marshes of Martorello, at the very back of the valley, which runs almost parallel to the shore, behind the shelter of the cliff, one finds the post road going from Monteleone to the little port of Tropea, and then to Nicotera and Palmi. Tropea is a steamboat station between Naples and Sicily. At the place where the road crosses the Brentola over a small stone bridge stands a square house, solidly built, which appears to be at least fifty years old. An inscription painted in legible characters above the main door announces to travelers that they are in the presence of the Osteria—which is to say, the inn—del Corpo-Santo. A few paces from the inn, the road, the valley and the river make an abrupt turn in order to take a direction perpendicular to the shore. The river, the valley and he road turn in that fashion in order to skirt a rather steep rocky slope, as the summit of which stands the majestic convent of the Corpo-Santo, which has given its name to the humble osteria.

On 15 October 1822,[1] Battista Giubbetti, a coach-driver[2] of Monteleone, returning from the little port of Palmi, was carrying four passengers in his brand new carrozza, three in the interior and one in the cabriolet, serving as a seat. His vehicle was hitched to two good Abruzzo horses, freshly shod and well plumed with woolen tufts: a fine rig whose outfit had been arranged on departure from Monteleone by Battista's young wife. In young households everything is spick and span while the gaieties of the honeymoon are still felt.

Battista was a jovial fellow, slightly pale and very thin—typical of the region—but well-proportioned and wearing his effeminately curly hair proudly. He was pressing on, even more eager to

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[1] The text I am translating has 1823, but that is also the year cited for the next section of the text, set some months later, and 1822 is consonant with the significant fact of seven years having elapsed since Mario Monteleone's death in 1815.

[2] The term that I have translated as "coach-driver," *veturin*, has no precise English equivalent. Battista is not an ordinary cab-driver but someone more akin to a modern bus-driver, whose vehicle runs to an approximate schedule, making regular stops but also dropping passengers and picking them up anywhere along the route.

arrive than the travelers. Inside, there was a man of about forty, of unhealthy appearance, and wearing a black silk bonnet on his bald head. He occupied the rear seat on his own, as per the express terms of his contract with Battista Giubbetti.

On the front bench, and adolescent and a young woman were sitting backwards. The adolescent was wearing the semi-clerical costume that enables the students of seminaries to be recognized in all countries. The girl was wearing a short gray dress and a French straw hat. That was not an opulent costume, but the young woman did not seem to care about that. In spite of the mischievousness of her gaze and the finesse of her charming smile, she seemed even more reserved than her companion. She was a young nun in embryo, as the other as a candidate for the priesthood. Both are abundant in the kingdom of Naples.

She was pretty, and also beautiful. We could almost say that she was more beautiful than pretty, but for the infantile and unexpected friendliness of the charming smile that continually pierced her decent and austere mask. That mask was a product of education; nature made her smile. And there was something truly original about the struggle engaged, on the terrain of that delightful face, between natural petulance and taught reserve.

The design of her face was both delicate and bold. Her forehead, intelligent to the highest degree, was crowned with black hair whose richness was dissimulated rather than shown off, lost beneath a little cotton bonnet with no ornamentation. Without that bonnet, the poor straw hat would have been almost elegant. Her gaze was thoughtful but became grave at will. A high collar gave to the dress the same impression that the jealous bonnet inflicted on the hat. And yet, without that severe accoutrement, it would have been easy to divine the fine suppleness of a figure already formed, which would have caused the shiniest pleats of satin to creak. That fact, which indicated simultaneously kindness, infantile grace, and a certain adventurous and bold spirit, brightened with a smile so affectionate when she looked at her brother that the most indifferent individuals would have sensed interest born within them, almost affection.

The seminarian with the long blond hair, awaiting a tonsure, had to be her brother. There was a resemblance between the two children that was unmistakable. The gravity of the young man was simply more sincere and more naïve. To judge by appearances, the brother was eighteen years old and the sister sixteen. Speaking in whispers, they sometimes employed Italian and sometimes French, and in either case their language was of an equal purity. Reciprocally, however, they only pronounced their names in French. The brother was named Julian, the sister Céleste.

The man with two places at the back also had a French name. When the coachman had boarded his passengers at the moment of departure he had initially called for Monsieur David. Monsieur David had maintained silence since the beginning of the journey. He had scarcely given the young couple sitting facing him a morose and distracted glance. Only, Céleste having pronounced the word “brigand,” Monsieur David had shrugged his shoulders with an immense affectation of disdain.

People traveling in Calabria often pronounce the word “brigand.” Skeptics do as the man in a black silk bonnet did: they shrug their shoulders. Monsieur David had particular reasons for shrugging his shoulders like that when people talked about brigands. He had a bilious and pensive face: the head of a Genevan, slightly narrow but trenchant and decisive. One could not say that he had an evil physiognomy; in our utilitarian century the word “evil” has arrived at no longer having any meaning; it is necessary to replace it by more precise expressions. There was, therefore, in Monsieur David’s cold and sad gaze a profound fatigue that could easily be translated by the word *misanthropic*. There was bitterness and severity in the lines of his mouth. His brow was receding, but had height; the abrupt curve of his hooked nose was provocative. In sum, the general aspect of the face indicated reflection, reserve, austerity and egotism.

There remains one person for us to depict: the coachman’s companion, the one sitting on the cabriolet alongside Battista Giubbetti. In the coach-driver’s book he had given his name as the Chevalier d’Athol. He had arrived in Sicily by ferry and had only booked his seat as far at the convent del Corpo-Santo. He was a handsome fellow with an alert and sovereignly valiant manner. Meditation did not stifle him, at least in appearance. His gaze, clear and insouciant, was scanning the landscape, while his slender

fingers, as pale and pretty as the fingers of a Comtesse, rolled a thin cigarette. He was very young; one would only have credited him with twenty-two or twenty-three years, but for the silky black moustache that shadowed his upper lip. Half-lying as he was in the cabriolet, one could not judge his height, but you would have divined that he was tall, and the very nonchalance of his pose implied a marvelous flexibility.

It seemed that everything would be easy for that handsome idle lion, except perhaps the stiff and knotty awkwardness of our fashionable gentlemen. It is necessary not swear to anything, though; awkwardness is within the range of all adroit individuals, and intelligent men have the fortunate faculty of being idiots when the occasion warrants it. Perhaps, if necessary, the Chevalier d'Athol could have weighed down the supple grace of his torso and posed as a springless mannequin on a English sidewalk, every bit as grotesque as a stuffed sportsman. His costume indicated a habitual traveler.

Although tourists are not exactly abundant in these parts, they do come every year. Fifty Englishmen take care to carry away in their pockets a few clods of earth from the gulf of Oppido.

Our traveler, whose mouth allowed to pass a musical and sonorous speech, could not be an Englishman; and yet Battista, the honest man, called him "Milord." Such is the result of the fever for travel that the cutlers of Birmingham have had for fifty years. Whoever strolls around in Greece or Italy passes for the indigenes as a manufacturer of razors, and immediately receives the title of Milord. Furthermore, the name of Athol is illustrious on the other side of the channel; it belonged to a former sovereign of the Isle of Man. It is inscribed, with a ducal title, in the peerage of the realm. It is a great name borne by great lords. Let us say right away, however, that our Chevalier d'Athol had no right of succession to the peerage. He had the bold sap of his youth and fate.

The road that climbs from Tropea to Monteleone goes down into the plain first and then doubles back, repelled by the base of Mont Mimo, in such a fashion that it goes along the coast briefly before arriving at Capo Vaticano.

"Look at that, Milord," said Battista, at the moment when a bend in the road unmasked the Tyrrhenian Sea. "What a view! In the background, you can easily perceive Sicily, the former Trinacria… or Sucania, capital Syracuse, in the time of the Romans…Presently Palermo; products: excellent wines, fruits, wheat, oil, silk, wool. Cotton, sugar, manna, honey, wax...pure and healthy air, fish-rich sea, celebrated for its volcano, which is named Etna, which rises to three thousand and some meters above sea level. There are mines of gold, silver, copper, lead and iron…quarries of porphyry, marble, jasper, agate and emeralds. It produces alum, vitriol and sulfur…but Your Excellency is coming from there," Battista interrupted himself, belatedly.

All coach-drivers are to some extent cicerones; they seize with a certain pleasure the opportunity to reel off their patter.

"To the left, with your permission, Milord," Battista went on, "are the Liparian islands, of which the principal…"

"What is there now in the Martorello?" the young voyager asked, abruptly.

Battista almost dropped the reins. He looked at the traveler covertly. "His Excellency has been to the area before?" he asked.

"I asked you, my friend," repeated the Chevalier d'Athol, "what there is now in the Martorello?"

"Well," the coachman replied, "in the Martorello, Milord…there's nothing, so far as I know."

"What has become of *the Six*?"

"*The Six*?" Battista repeated with an innocent expression. At the same time he administered a master stroke of the whip to his animals.

The Chevalier d'Athol began to whistle a tune by Fioravanti[3] very softly:

Amici, alliegre andiamo alla pena!

A pretty Neapolitan tune, Milord!" murmured the coachman, whose agitation was visible.

"What has become of *the Six*?" repeated the traveler.

"*Ohime*!" muttered Battista. "There's no shortage of people who known music."

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[3] Valentino Fioravanti (1764-1837) was a famous composer of comic operas, who was particularly popular in Naples. The line quoted translates approximately as "Friends, let's head for trouble gladly."

“Give me your hand,” ordered the Chevalier d’Athol, “if you know charcoal and iron.”

Tremulously, Battista extended his hand.

“All right, all right,” he said, feeling the double cross that the stranger traced in his palm. “I’ve heard mention of that from an agent of King Ferdinand, who was looking for it in the direction of Monteleone...”

The Chevalier d’Athol smiled and said: “You’re a prudent fellow, my friend. Then letting go of Battista’s hand and looking him in the face, he pronounced distinctly: “There is something stronger than iron.”

“It is faith,” replied the coachman, without hesitation.

“There is something blacker than charcoal,” added the young traveler.

“It is the conscience of a traitor.”

“You’re a companion?”

“You’re a master! By the grace of God! I have a wife and child on the way, but by Saint John my patron, precursor of Christ, if it’s necessary to go, I’ll go!”

“What has become of the Six?” asked Athol for the third time.

“Excellency,” replied Battista, “if you’re a master, how can you not know that?”

“Speak,” said the young traveler, “in the name of charcoal and iron!”

“There were seven,” murmured the coachman.

“I know where the tomb of the seventh is,” pronounced the Chevalier d’Athol, in a melancholy fashion.