

5 The train had just left Genoa en route for Marseille and was following the long curves of the rocky coast. It slithered like an iron snake between the mountains and the sea, past beaches of yellow sand lapped by little silver waves, before being swallowed up into the mouth of a tunnel like an animal bolting into its lair.

10 In the last carriage a plump woman and a young man were sitting opposite each other in silence, stealing the odd surreptitious glance at each other. She was about twenty-five and sitting on the door side of the carriage, looking out at the passing scenery. She was a stocky, chubby-cheeked Piedmontese peasant woman with black hair and a full bosom. Having pushed several parcels under the wooden seat she was now holding a basket on her knees.

15 The young man was about twenty, very thin and with the deep tan of someone who works in the fields under a blazing sun. Beside him tied up in a bundle was his entire fortune: a pair of shoes, a shirt, a pair of breeches and a jacket. Under his seat he had stowed a pick and shovel tied together with rope. He was hoping to find work in France.

20 The sun as it rose poured a rain of fire over the coast. It was late May and delightful fragrances filled the air and wafted through the lowered carriage windows. Orange and lemon trees in blossom breathed upwards into the peaceful sky sweet, pervasive, honeyed scents which mingled with the perfume of the roses growing wild along the track, rambling over the rich gardens they passed, around the doors of tumbledown country cottages and in the open country too. This coast is their natural habitat.
25 They fill the place with their light yet powerful fragrance and turn the air itself into something both sweeter than wine and equally intoxicating.

30 The train was moving slowly as if it wanted to linger and savour the gentle charm of this Eden. It kept stopping at small stations where a few white houses stood. Then, after giving a long whistle, it continued on its leisurely way. No one ever got on. It was as if the entire population was dozing and reluctant to move at all on that hot morning in spring.

35 From time to time the plump woman's eyes would droop then quickly fly open again as she just managed to save the basket from falling off her knees. She would examine the contents for a while then nod off again. Beads of sweat stood like pearls on her forehead and she was breathing with difficulty as if she were suffering from some

painful constriction. The young man's head had fallen forward on to his chest and he was sleeping the deep, sound sleep of a country lad.

Suddenly, as they were leaving a small station, the peasant woman seemed to revive. Opening her basket she took from it a hunk of bread, some hard-boiled eggs, a flask of wine and some beautiful, crimson plums. She began to eat. The young man, having also awoken, watched her, following the progress of each mouthful from her knees to her lips. He sat with his arms folded, his eyes fixed and his own lips pressed together. His cheeks were hollow.

The woman ate with huge gusto, swigging at the wine flask greedily to help the hard-boiled eggs down, then stopping to get her breath back. She devoured the lot – the bread, the eggs, the plums and all the wine. As soon as she had finished her meal the boy closed his eyes again. The woman loosened her bodice to be more comfortable and he suddenly looked up at her again. With not a trace of self-consciousness she went on unbuttoning her dress. The pressure of her bosom stretched the fabric so that, as the opening widened, a flash of white undergarment and a little of her skin were revealed. Feeling much more at ease now the woman said in Italian: "So hot you can't breathe, hardly."

The young man replied in the same language and with the same accent as her own: "Good weather for travelling."

"You from Piedmont?" she asked.

"Asti."

"I'm from Casale."

Immediately, they started chatting together as neighbours. For some time, as is often the case among ordinary people not much used to making conversation with strangers, their exchanges were stiff and formal. They then discussed local affairs and discovered mutual acquaintances. As the list of people they had each recently bumped into grew, the two became friends. Brief, hurried words with sonorous endings fell from their lips in lilting Italian. They moved on to personal matters.

She was married with three children who were now in the care of her sister. She herself had found a good job as wet-nurse to a French lady living in Marseille. The man was looking for employment. He too had been told he was sure to find some in Marseille since apparently there was a good deal of construction work on offer.

They then fell silent.

The heat beating down furiously on the carriage roofs was becoming unbearable. A cloud of dust raised by the train drifted in. The smell of the orange and lemon trees as well as of the roses became stronger, yet more pervasive and heavier. The two passengers fell asleep once more.

5 When they opened their eyes again it was simultaneously. The sun was sinking towards the sea and casting a brilliant sheen on its blue waters. The air freshened and became a touch lighter. Even with her bodice loosened, the wet-nurse was panting. Her cheeks looked flabby and her eyes lacklustre. She said in a weak voice: "I haven't given the breast since yesterday. I feel so giddy with it. Almost faint."

10 Not knowing what to say, he made no reply.

"When a woman produces as much milk as I do she has to give the breast three times a day. If not it gets very painful. It's like a weight pressing down on me. Stops me breathing. Does me in. That much milk's a real problem."

"I'm sure," he said, "it must be a nuisance for you."

15 She did look in a very bad way indeed, as if she might pass out any minute.

"I've only got to press for the milk to come gushing out like a fountain. It's amazing. Unbelievable. At Casale all the neighbours used to come and watch."

"Oh really?" he said.

20 "Yes really. I'd show you now only it wouldn't be any help to me. Not enough comes out that way."

She fell silent.

The train stopped at a little halt. Standing behind the barrier was a thin woman dressed in rags and carrying a crying baby in her arms. The wet-nurse looked at her sympathetically.

25 "Now there's a woman I could help. And that baby would give me some relief, I can tell you! I'm not a rich woman else I wouldn't be leaving my home like this, and my people and my darling little youngest to find work away, but I'd give five whole francs quick as a flash to have that kid for ten minutes and give it the breast. I'd be a new woman."

Again she fell silent. Several times she raised her hot hand to wipe her forehead which was dripping with sweat. She groaned: "I can't stand it any more. I'll die in a minute."

5 With an unselfconscious movement she opened her dress completely, revealing her enormous, taut right breast with its brown nipple. The poor woman was moaning: "Oh my God! I don't know what to do! What can I do?"

10 The train had set off again and was continuing its journey amid the flowers whose fragrance now deepened in the warmth of the evening. From time to time a fishing boat would appear, sleeping on the surface of the blue sea, its motionless white sail reflected in the water like its own double, upside-down.

Embarrassed the young man stammered: "Madame... perhaps I could... perhaps I could help you?"

In a broken voice she replied: "Oh yes if you will. That'd be a great help. I can't... I really can't stand it any more!"

15 He knelt down in front of her. She leaned towards him and with a practised gesture pushed the dark tip of her breast towards his mouth. With the movement she made with both hands to proffer her breast to the man a drop of milk appeared at the crown. He licked it greedily then, as if on a fruit, closed his lips on the heavy breast. Regularly and deeply he began to suck. He put both arms around the woman's waist
20 so as to bring her closer to him and drank in long, slow draughts, making movements with his neck like a baby.

Suddenly she said: "There, that's enough on that side. Take the other one now."

Obediently he moved to the other breast. She put her two hands on the young man's back and was now breathing deeply and contentedly, enjoying the fragrance of the
25 flowers mingled with the gusts of air that blew into the carriage as they moved.

"Smells lovely round here," she said.

He made no reply and continued to drink at the human fountain, his eyes closed as if to savour the pleasure of it. Gently, however, she pushed him away.

"That's enough. I feel much better now. It's put new life in me."

30 He got up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. As she replaced inside her dress the two living gourds of her bosom, she said, "That was a great help, Monsieur. Thanks very much."

Gratefully, he replied, “My pleasure, Madame, I’ll tell you. I’ve had no food for two days.”