

## PIETA

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WHERE the road from Spello crosses the Umbrian plain and bends toward Assisi, an old woman came leading a child by the hand, a peasant woman aged before her time, bent with long toil and the bearing of many children, her skin withered by the wind and sun and by the acrid smoke of the fire in the squalid, cave-like hole in which she lived. She plodded on slowly, steadfast, her gaze bent on the road before her, tugging occasionally at the child to hurry him, or muttering a short word of encouragement. It was winter and the great plain about them, that in summer was joyful with shade and sun and the leafy, ripening vines, was now bared and spectral, streaked with strange ochreous lights and violet shadows, and swept by a bitter wind that swirled the dry dust before it and filled the eyes and mouth with a hard grit. It cut the air like a blade, penetrating the poor woman's ragged clothing, till her flesh trembled and the child's hand was numb in her own. But she did not heed it, only dragged on relentlessly, intent on her single purpose, murmuring again, "Come then, come".

The gust spent itself, and fell in a moment's quiet, the dust settled once more on the hard soil, and the scene achieved a dull quiescence, that was without rest. Even when the sun shone thinly down on the dried riverbed and along the limitless vineyards, there was no comfort in them. The earth seemed aged and weary as the woman herself.

They had left the little hamlet on the hills by Spello in the early morning and had walked a long time, making slow progress because of the child's short stride. He wore his best clothes for the journey to Assisi, and though they were better than her own, and still quite new, the grandmother looked down now and then with a dull bitterness at the little black skirt and fez and the blue neckerchief of the *Balila*. He was so little, yet already they had put him in uniform. Could they not leave even the children apart from this thing? He was so very young.

She sat down suddenly by the roadside, and drew out a roll of coarse bread and broke it in two that they might eat, and then set out again, inexorably, pressing on.

The were drawing close now to their goal, and could see St. Mary of the Angels white and shiny in the level valley, and above

them on the hills amid olives and towers, and the dark, wrapt flames of cypress, the old honey-colored church and convent of San Francesco, rising on great stone arches built into the cliff above the Tescio. Before them the road rose steeply, climbing the slope, and taking pity on the weary child she waited for a man who was approaching with a team of oxen, large, slow, milk-white beasts with soft watchful eyes, and curving, slender horns festooned with little strings of red pompoms. They were drawing a two-wheeled cart, painted orange, with a high, springing yoke, laden with winestuns for the town. They came on patient, unhurrying, slower than a footpace, and she stopped the man who trudged beside them and begged a ride for the boy up to the gates of the town. He climbed joyfully on to the front of the cart and rode up the hill in pride, singing to himself a little song in a thin, high voice. The grandmother talked to the driver, as they walked along together. She had been born in Assisi, she told him, but had married a man from Spello, and had lived ever since at the other end of the plain. She had come now with her grandchild on a pilgrimage to her own San Francesco—such a beautiful church! Spello was not like Assisi; its heart was different. She had not been happy there. Her sons had all gone to the war. But at this mention of the war her face grew suddenly silent and shadowed, and her lips thinly drawn, and she spoke no more, only climbed dumbly and resolutely up the winding road.

As they drew near the Franciscan Gate, in a lofty arcade just below the brow of the hill women were washing linen in large stone troughs, and turned to look at the little group, giving them as they passed a soft chorus of greeting, "*Giorno, buon' giorno*".

At the entrance to the town the child got down from the oxcart and looked, gravely curious, at the great wooden doors propped back against the stone flanks of the gateway. He asked his grandmother if they would be closed when night came, but she shook her head. No, they were never closed now. They had stood open so for years, oh, many years. Perhaps they had been shut once in the old days, when there was danger without and men fought one with another from Spello and Sienna and Perugia. Now they did not fight here any more. They went far away and no one knew where the dead were laid, to bring flowers to them, or to light a lamp upon their graves at the Feast of Souls, as he himself had lighted a lamp for his grandfather last year. And again her face darkened.

Within the town they turned sharply to the left along the narrow Via San Francesco, and came out into the great outer court of the convent where the pale sunshine was held by the shallow arches of the cloister as in a vast reservoir of light. They warmed themselves a little here, sheltered from the wind, and then entered the Lower Church. It was filled with shadow and icily chill, crypt-like, with wide, low vaulting and cavernous, dim recesses. They stood there, transfixed, uncertain, but when their eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, they went over timidly to where a sacristan sat by a table, holding between his hands a small basket-shaped brazier of hot charcoal, in a vain effort to keep warm. Here they paused again while the grandmother spoke to the man in a hoarse, quavering tone. She listened to what he said in reply, hesitated, and at last drew out furtively from her dress a little black bag, full of coins and tied with string, which her withered hands clutched with a peasant's greed. Now that the moment had come and her mission was all but accomplished, she could not bring herself to part with her small treasure, carefully hoarded for this day. Reluctantly she unknotted the cord and counted out the coins, slowly, separately, with shaking fingers on to the sacristan's table. And he gave in exchange seven wax candles. Holding them in her shawl, she went with the child, feeling her way up through the vast darkness, not to the High Altar but to a little chapel at one side, in the transept, where a few lights were already burning. She bowed and crossed herself and lighted her seven tapers one by one, and set them in a row in the iron rings, while the child watched her fascinated, and the candles joined their seven flames to the other flickering lights that burned in what seemed to him an endless, roofless twilight. He knelt down by his grandmother, and when his thin knees touched the bare stone he shuddered with cold. She held him close in the crook of her arm and watched silently the candles, burning brighter for her glittering tears. Her old eyes sought among the shadowy vaults for the painting she remembered as a child, the dead Christ taken from the cross, and His Mother bent, mourning, to kiss the thorn-crowned head; but her sight, bleared and dim, could no longer discern it, and with a sigh she turned again to the lights of the altar. Mary, they said, had seven joys and seven sorrows, but she had only one son. Only one to lose, O lady Mary!

To her gaze distraught with fatigue and grief, the seven candles became seven shrouded forms, standing there wrapt in their grave sheets, with flames upon their heads that were their souls,

the souls of her seven sons gone from her side and dead in some strange land. What fate had called them from her she could not tell, her mind could not grasp the battle or the wounds, or the evil that stalked upon the earth calling down destruction like fire from heaven, of which they had been made a part. She only knew they had gone from her one by one, and now would never return. Nothing was left to her but the small child at her feet. And then suddenly she began to weep with deep, quick sobs that shook her wasted body, yet so intent and inward was her grief, so centred on some vast unutterable pang within her soul, that she herself seemed hardly conscious of her own weeping.

Who shall answer for the sorrows of the humble and their pitiful bewildered griefs?

Two young German officers, who had come into the church and were inspecting the frescoes by the aid of an electric torch and a pair of binoculars, looked at her uneasily. She seemed so very old and wept so blindly. Did they feel, even they, that age might be spared such sorrow? A group of Poor Clares, who knelt near her in their brown habits, were disturbed at their devotions, and turned and glanced toward her with a cold pity. Soon after, they left, and the officers too, and she was alone once more with her grandchild. Intent upon her vigil she took no heed of passing time, only knelt and watched and wept, while the candles guttered low and lower like wasting lives. The boy had fallen asleep with his head against her thigh, and when he moaned with cold she slipped from her own thin shoulders the black, ragged shawl, and spread it upon him. All that was left! Even his mother had grown weary of sorrow and had gone from them to the city, seeking a new life. And he alone was left to her alone!

She tried for a while to pray, her rosary in her hand, but the beads slipped unfelt from her cold grasp, and she watched quite motionless, absorbed, remote, and one by one the candles flickered and went out. Yet still she did not move.

She was roused from her stupor by the sacristan who was locking the church and who turned them forth still dazed, and stumbling, hardly knowing where they went. The sunlight was gone from the cloister, but the air revived them both and they found their way again down the street and out the gate of the town. She turned once, as if suddenly stricken, to look back at the church tower, and once stooping, she picked up a few of the small black olives, windfallen, that lay unheeded by the road and gave them to the child to suck as they went down the hill.

Weary as he was he dragged heavily, with all his weight, on her thin, tired hand. At the stone arcade the last of the washer-women had piled up her linen in a basket balanced delicately on her head and climbed past them, erect, with light, swinging stride. Her soft voice brushed by them in the shadow, "*Buona sera, padrona, buona sera*".

The light was low upon the hills, and their shadows stretched before them at fantastic length as they turned homeward again on the long road to Spello.