RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Matchmaker

Stella Gibbons

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About the Book

Uprooted from war-torn London, Alda Lucie-Brown and her three daughters start a new life at Pine Cottage in rural Sussex. Unsuited to a quiet life, Alda attempts to orchestrate – with varying degrees of success – the love affairs of her neighbours. Her unwilling subjects include an Italian POW, a Communist field-hand, a battery-chicken farmer and her intelligent friend Jean.

About the Author

Stella Gibbons was born in London in 1902. She went to the North London Collegiate School and studied journalism at University College, London. She then spent ten years working for various newspapers, including the *Evening Standard*. Stella Gibbons is the author of twenty-five novels, three volumes of short stories and four volumes of poetry. Her first publication was a book of poems, *The Mountain Beast* (1930), and her first novel *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) won the Femina Vie Heureuse Prize in 1933. Amongst her works are *Christmas at Cold Comfort Farm* (1940), *Westwood* (1946), *Conference at Cold Comfort Farm* (1959) and *Starlight* (1967). She was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1950. In 1933 she married the actor and singer Allan Webb. They had one daughter. Stella Gibbons died in 1989.

ALSO BY STELLA GIBBONS

Cold Comfort Farm

Bassett

Enbury Heath

Nightingale Wood

My American

Christmas at Cold Comfort Farm

The Rich House

Ticky

The Bachelor

Westwood

Conference at Cold Comfort Farm

Here Be Dragons

White Sand and Grey Sand

The Charmers

Starlight

To Enid Gibbons and The Blue Idol – affectionately, peacefully

STELLA GIBBONS

The Matchmaker

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

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ON THE JOURNEY from London down into Sussex, Major Ronald Lucie-Browne was entrapped into conversation by an elderly gentleman, who lost no time in revealing that he had once been a Captain, and went on to relate that he was an expert in the science of firing a revolver. This (as you would of course be aware) was no easy performance; none of your shutting one eye and taking aim at the target; no, it was a highly complicated operation; it was a science; but neither in the war that was just over, nor in the one before that, had he found it properly accepted as such. There will just be time, before we reach your station, to explain it.

Ronald Lucie-Browne listened in silence, not once letting his eye stray towards the satchel upon his knee containing reports from the Liberal Party's office in the constituency which he hoped to contest during the next General Election. Born and educated as a gentleman, he had earned his living during the fourteen years since coming down from Oxford as Reader in French Language and Literature at one of the older provincial universities, but his nature was not completely suited to the calm of modern academic life in England (which lacks the excitement of intellectual speculation characterising such life in the great American universities) and also—like so many of his generation—he was cursed with a sense of social responsibility. It had seemed to him, after much uneasy and earnest thought, that it was his duty to try to enter politics. His voluntary enlistment during the first months of the war and his

subsequent military service had interrupted this plan, but now that the date for his demobilisation was in sight, he hoped to enter seriously upon it.

He had intended to study the reports during the journey into Sussex because he knew that he would have neither the time nor the inclination to read them after he got there, but he had not the ruthlessness necessary in dealing with elderly gentlemen who explain to us about revolvers, being a kind, grave, affectionate young man who proposed, thus handicapped, to enter the political sewers for the good of his fellow beings.

It appeared that *you fired at the chap's stomach when you intended to hit him in the heart*. There! It was out! The elderly gentleman relaxed; he leaned back; he repeated the secret several times in a lulling diminuendo which seemed to marvel at the simplicity and infallibility of the method just revealed; and then, having accepted one of Ronald's cigarettes, he became silent, as if exhausted by his efforts, and gazed rather glassily out of the window.

As it was now too late to begin upon the reports, Ronald also looked out of the window. The scanty copper and bronze leaves of late November burned along the hedges and far down in the brown and purple woods under a breaking grey sky, and the autumn landscape, that for six years had seemed to be watchfully, patiently submitting itself to darkness and danger and cold, was now settling into its natural winter sleep. There was relief in the very air, but his thoughts always became sad when he found himself alone, and presently, as he watched the woods gliding past, the familiar despair with the state of the world began to invade his mind—until it was suddenly banished by the realisation that in a few moments he would be with his family.

"Nearly there; yours is the next station," observed the elderly gentleman, coming out of a reverie-doze. "Ah yes,

this is where *we* began to get *our* luggage down when *we* lived at Sillingham."

He went on to inquire if Ronald himself lived there? (having asked no personal questions during the journey because he had been busy explaining about the revolvers).

"My wife has just taken a furnished cottage down here," was the answer.

"Oh, really? She was lucky to get it. I wonder if I know it?" with a gleam of reviving, but this time purely civilian, interest.

"It's called Pine Cottage. It's about two miles out of Sillingham on the Froggatt road, near a small farm called Naylor's."

"In-deed! Pine Cottage! Yes, I do know it; I know it *well*, and so does my wife."

His tone was far from encouraging; indeed, it combined dismay with commiseration in a manner that would have alarmed Ronald, had not his anticipations about Pine Cottage already been coloured by knowledge of the tastes and habits of his wife, to whom he had been married for twelve years. He forbore to comment, merely remarking that Pine Cottage stood in the fields, about a quarter of a mile from the Froggatt road. That (added Ronald, deliberately inviting comment) would be a disadvantage in winter weather, he feared.

But the elderly gentleman suddenly went into his shell; he said no more; he only nodded and gazed out of the window with his lips portentously compressed, rather as Bottom's may have been when hinting marvels to honest Snout. Ronald had his luggage ready and was waiting by the door for the train to stop.

They were now passing low-lying meadows, mounting into hills crowned with the leafless woods of winter through which evening light was shining, and both travellers simultaneously became aware of a row of faces confronting them along a white gate in the hedge below. There was a

woman in a gay plaid coat, with bright hair blowing about, and three little girls, one a mere baby, all cheering and waving as the train went by. It looked quite a party of pleasure in the midst of the silent fields under the fading light, and even above the noise of the train they could hear the children's shrill voices; blankets were scattered about on the grass, and there was an old pram in the background, and bunches of autumn leaves were being waved above the laughing faces.

"Evacuees," announced the elderly revolver expert, settling his tie with a well-kept hand. "We have suffered greatly from them down here, poor things. Both sides have done their best, but there *is* a fundamental difference in outlook, so why not be a realist and admit it? Is your wife meeting you by car?"

Ronald, smiling for the first time that afternoon, shook his head.

"We hope to have ours in use again next week and damned glad I shall be, too. Well, here you are. Good-day; give my love to the Ruhr. It's twenty-five years since I was there in the last Army of Occupation."

"I will, sir. Good afternoon."

A moment later he was hurrying down the platform, looking nowhere but towards the ticket-barrier, and some ten minutes later (the train having been most irritatingly delayed over some matter of eggs) the elderly gentleman had the shock of seeing him walking along the road arm in arm with the bright-haired woman in the plaid coat.

"Married beneath him, poor fellow," he thought, as the train moved away.

Alda Lucie-Browne pushed the pram with one hand and clung to her husband with the other, while the two little girls skirmished on the outskirts and the baby twisted herself round to join in the conversation. They all talked at once except Ronald.

“—and we shall just have time to see the cottage before it gets dark, darling,” said Alda.

“We always have high tea at Pagets, Father, and it’s sausages to-night. Every night we have something different. To-morrow it’s macaroni cheese,” said Jenny, the girl of eleven. “They’re going to save you some sausages, too.”

“Will there be remartoes for Meg’s tea?” demanded the baby, who was aged three and a half, in a clear, precise voice.

“*To*-matoes,” muttered Jenny.

“Don’t pick on her, Jenny, you know mother likes to hear her,” whispered Louise, who was ten, as Alda turned the pram aside through a gate which Ronald swung open.

“Thank you, dear. We go across this meadow and the next one, and there we are,” she said.

“It’s getting very dark.” He glanced doubtfully across the still, damp fields where mist was already rising. “Is Meg well wrapped up?”

“Oh yes, she’s got her winter vest on to-day.”

“And me cardigan,” added Meg, pulling half of that garment out from her overcoat. “Look, Farder.”

“*And* her rubber boots,” said Louise. “And on Tuesday we have bacon and egg pie, Father, and on Wednesday boiled shell eggs …”

“Look!” Jenny stopped short in a patch of long moist grass and pointed upwards. She was smiling, as if offering her family a present. They all gazed at the heavens, following the dark line of her finger in its woollen glove and there, hidden until now among the clouds but at last revealed as they thinned and rolled away at sunset, was a pink November moon.

“A moon!” said Jenny. “Now it doesn’t matter how late we are, because we can see,” and she ran off into the meadows, followed by Louise.

“Meg will get out,” announced Meg, struggling with the strap that confined her.

“Oh no Meg won’t. It’s too wet. Father will push the pram now, because the ground is bumpy, and Meg will have a nice ride,” said Ronald, taking over the pram from Alda, who placidly dropped her hands into her pockets and strolled along smiling absently at the ground, while he steered the pram round molehills and the tussocks of last spring’s grass, and patiently extracted details from her about the lease and rent for Pine Cottage and the terms of the agreement.

“But there *is* inside sanitation, Ronald. Didn’t I tell you? I thought I did. *And* a bathroom. But no electric light. Oh look, children, there’s a rabbit! Quick, Louise, there by the hedge! You can see his white scut.”

“Oh Mother, *where*?” Louise’s voice was anguished. “Quick!”

“There,” said Jenny scornfully, and her finger came steadily over her sister’s twisting shoulder, and pointed, “In a direct line with my finger.”

But it was no use; Louise could not see, and the rabbit, startled by their voices, suddenly whisked and was gone. Louise came silently over to her father and slipped her cold hand into the one that left the handle of the pram to meet it.

“And four bedrooms, Alda?” Ronald went on. “That sounds all right. Is it properly furnished?”

“Indeed it is, rather too much so. You wait till you see the pictures. You’ll hate them.”

“I shan’t have much opportunity to hate them, sweetheart.”

“O Ronald, why?” Startled, she looked up at him.

“I’m being sent to Germany.”

“O *darling*! O Ronald, how unutterably sickening. When did you hear?”

“Only this morning. I didn’t want to spring it on you the minute we met.”

“How long for, in heaven’s name?”

“Indefinitely, but I shall get leave of course.”

“Won’t you even be here for *Christmas*, Father?” demanded Jenny, outraged. “I do think, now the war is over, they might let you. They are beasts.”

“I’m afraid not, old lady.”

Alda was silent for a moment; then she said: “Well, we must just look forward to leave, that’s all. It’s too bad, losing you again after we’d just got you after four years, but it’s no use grumbling, I suppose, and we’ll have a lovely time while you *are* here. You’ll be out altogether soon. When do you go?”

“Next week, I’m afraid, lovey.”

She said no more, but slipped her arm through his and pressed it. Her gay, rebellious spirit would never learn patience but she no longer wasted energy in defying the inevitable, and they had long ago decided that, should he be sent to Germany, they would not risk her accompanying him with the children.

“Over here,” she said presently, withdrawing her arm and beginning to climb a slip-gate marking the entrance to the next field. Beyond its bars of silvery oak, Ronald could see another dim green meadow placidly extending away into the gathering twilight, while overhead the pink moon had changed to gold amidst fragile grey clouds. The evening bus to Horsham with all its lights blazing cheerfully was passing along the main road three fields away.

“How would you have managed with the pram if I hadn’t been here?” he demanded, when he had lifted the pram over the slip-gate. “Seriously, Alda, is it much further? How on earth you’re going to manage in the winter——”

“Oh, this is the *long* way round,” she laughed, turning back from hurrying up the rising slope of the meadow with

her daughters. “The cottage is only two or three hundred yards from the Froggatt road. We came this way to-day to meet your train. There!” She stopped, pointing. “There it is.”

He had not realised, so gradual was the incline which they had been ascending, that they now stood on the highest point for miles around, and could command a wide prospect over dusky woods and darkening meadows ending at last in the long, rolling line of the downs fifteen miles away, sable and mysterious against the fading yellow sky. Immediately below lay a group of barns and other buildings with black wooden walls and mild grey thatched roofs, and beyond these, standing upon another low incline and surrounded by dark pines amongst whose pointed tops flashed a star, was a small, square house.

But stronger than his admiration of the scene was his relief that a cart track, unmistakable even in the dusk, ran across the meadows from the farm buildings to the cottage, and even as he looked, the headlights of a car, reassuringly close, glided past on the Froggatt road.

“Isn’t it a marvellous position?” demanded Alda.

“Those pines will make it damp,” he pronounced, beginning to push the pram forward again. “How far did you say you are from the village?”

“Not more than a mile and a half—well, say a mile and three-quarters——”

“Or two miles,” he muttered.

“And there’s a good road, downhill all the way. And there,” pointing away towards the woods, “is the convent where Jenny and Louise are going.” (Here Louise made a remarkable face expressing repugnance and despair, but Jenny looked attentively at her mother.)

“I went to see Sister Alban yesterday. It *is* so lovely and clean there, Ronald, with that marvellous feeling convents always have—you know?”

Ronald said, “H’m.”

“You can h’m, but they do.”

“How do you feel about it, Jen?” turning to his eldest daughter.

“I will deal with the situation as it arises,” answered Jenny sedately, quoting one of his own expressions. “All schools are beastly except Miss Mottram’s, so what does it matter?”

Louise looked at her sister respectfully, as one who hears of an ancient and honourable grief. She herself could barely remember the school in Ironborough which the sisters had attended before their home had been destroyed and their present nomadic existence had begun, but Jenny remembered it all; every schoolfellow, every detail of the day’s routine, every article of furniture in the large old-fashioned mansion converted into a school, and longed to return there.

Alda thought it wisest to ignore this, and said cheerfully:

“Here we are.”

They had now arrived at the house, and its square little face, with windows reflecting the yellow remnants of day, stared aloofly above them. Sussex tiles, pointed and decorated, covered the upper walls; there was a tiny porch over the front door, and the pines stood about it in a close half-circle. The front garden was primly enclosed by a wooden fence, and every foot of it was filled with thick, strong, bushy laurels whose branches pressed against the small front windows. Even on a bright day Pine Cottage never seemed full of light—the pine trees saw to that—and this evening in the eerie owl-light it actively breathed out darkness; the porch was a cave; the room beyond the laurel-shadowed windows might have been filled with squid-juice, so black was it, and every shadow from the surrounding woods seemed drawn into the circle of those sighing pines.

“Meg doesn’t like that little black house, Mudder,” remarked Meg, who had been silently looking up at Pine

Cottage.

“We’ll soon make it light,” answered Alda cheerfully, pushing open the gate. It had a rustic catch, and it stuck.

When they tried to unlock the front door with the key produced by Alda, that stuck, too.

“Here…” said Ronald, putting his shoulder to it. “Let me try….”

“Meg, you may come out now,” said Louise in a low authoritative tone, beginning to unbuckle the strap round her sister’s middle. “You must be a very good girl, because mother and father will be busy looking at the house and they won’t want to be interrupted. *Come* along,” and she set Meg’s tiny boots of patched rubber down on the path (which was of gravel; there was nothing so pleasant as a firm path of large stones, that could steam after a light spring rain or hold the heat of a long summer day, at Pine Cottage).

“Merciful heavens,” exclaimed Alda, as the door gave way with a wounded screech and Ronald fell into the black passage, “Are you all right, darling?”

He answered rather shortly that everything was comparative and then, as Alda lit the lamp on a table, they all burst out laughing; Meg was especially pleased to do so and held her face up to the light, making loud ha-has with her eyes shut. A passage was now revealed which apparently ran slap through the house and out the other side through a back door. It was covered in worn oilcloth. The yellow walls glistened with damp and the air struck deathly cold.

“B-o-r-l-e-y——” spelled Ronald, with a significant glance at his wife.

“Borley Rectory, the Most Haunted House in England,” took up Jenny promptly. “It was always cold there because of the ghosts. Do you think this is haunted, Father? How *super*!”

“Of course not, don’t be absurd.” Ronald put his hand on the shoulder of Louise, whose eyes suddenly looked very large. “Come along, let’s explore.”

“What a howwid smell,” said Meg heartily, as Alda with some difficulty opened a door on the right.”

“Look, darling, the living-room *is* rather small; I expect we shall live in the kitchen,” said Alda, withdrawing her head.

“I should think so too; beastly little morgue. What’s this?” as they approached another door at the end of the long passage.

“The kitchen. It isn’t too bad.”

“Everything seems fairly clean,” he said, glancing suspiciously about him when they had succeeded in getting the door open.

“And there’s a little boiler that heats the water, and the coal lives in a shed out here——”

She hurried with the lamp from room to room, only pausing when held up by a door which stuck; demonstrating, explaining, throwing open cupboards and generally casting her own glow so successfully over Pine Cottage that her husband found himself in the familiar position of thinking that the place was not so bad after all. The children followed her, with their three heads of flaxen hair palely reflecting the warm gold of her own; all three had a water-fairy look, with pale grey or green eyes and lily skins, but Jenny’s hair had the darkest tint and her eyes the deepest colour.

“Now let’s go upstairs,” said Alda, when they had inspected coal shed and larder and even ventured out into a small back garden overlooking the fields. “Now, the bedrooms really are the best part of the house.”

It occurred to Ronald that this was as well, since, when damp and lack of sun and endless mud had done their work, his family would probably spend much of their time in bed. But he did not say so; the house was taken; the

contract signed and stamped, and Alda and the children, in their own minds, already settled at Pine Cottage. If he put his foot down and insisted upon an upheaval, he would have to go to Germany in the following week leaving his family still unsettled for the winter, and he felt that he simply could not endure any fresh anxiety about them. They and he were so newly re-united, their shared happiness was still so sweet, that he could not cast a shadow over it by trying, perhaps unsuccessfully, to improve upon Alda's plans. After all, they were sure of a roof for their heads when much of England and most of Europe was living in a damaged house, or homeless. Here his flock of excitable, talkative feminine creatures must stay, in this depressing little place that was neither villa nor cottage standing so unexpectedly in the lonely fields; and here at least, while he was quartered in some dying town in broken Germany, he would be able to think of them on the long winter nights; safe, and in a home…of a sort.

"This reminds me of the seaside lodgings we used to stay in when I was a boy," he remarked, as they wandered in and out of the bedrooms, which were furnished with large brass bedsteads and solid Edwardian wardrobes and chests of drawers.

"*We* always stayed in hotels," said Alda, whose father was a wealthy general practitioner in the provincial city where she had been born.

"Yes, you poor little beasts." He was standing in front of a picture and shaking his head over it.

"We adored it; Jean and I used to get crushes on the waiters."

"Jean? What was she doing there with you?"

"She used to come away with us whenever her wretched mother wanted to get rid of her."

"The beds do bounce, Mother!" shouted Jenny from the next room.

“Don’t let Meg lie on them; they may be damp,” Alda called back. “It’s good that they bounce; they’ll be comfortable.”

“Didn’t you tell me that Mrs. Hardcastle died recently?” Ronald went on.

“Yes, about three months ago. I was so glad for Jean.”

“Oh *Mother*!” Louise was standing at the door with a face expressing double distress; that someone should be dead and her mother so unlike her usual self as to be glad because of it.

“Mrs. Hardcastle was very beastly, Weez,” said Jenny judicially. “You know what revolting teas she always gave us.”

“Perhaps she meant them to be nice.”

“Hur-hur! Perhaps not! Mother, I’m absolutely starving. How much longer are we going to stay here?”

“I shouldn’t let Louise and Jenny have this room, Alda; it gets no sun at all,” said Ronald, turning away from his picture. “All right, Jen, we’re going in a minute.”

“Have you seen enough to set your mind *at ease*, darling?” Alda asked, putting an arm about her husband’s neck and pulling his dark thin cheek down to her own. The gold in her hair, and her pale face and widely-curving smile, suggested a sunlit Amanda or Anthea, whereas “Alda” has an echo of the witchlike flowers and black berries of the elder tree, with some grey Norse sorceress weaving beneath its shade, but it means “rich,” and Ronald thought that it suited her.

“Nothing could do that,” he answered, sighing, and held her close for a moment. “How far are you here from Pagets?” (the house where they had been staying with the Friends).

“Only a mile across the fields in fine weather, but it’s a good three miles round by the road and the fields are impossible in the winter, unfortunately.”

“I wish you could have stayed on there.”

“So do I, but it just wasn’t possible. They’ll have no help in the house at all after next week, and the old lady is really ill. They’ve been so good to us; I can’t worry them any more.”

Ronald walked across to the window (which was a modern one, set flatly in a metal frame and interposing none of the comfort of wood and deep-sunk panes between the room and the chilly night) and stared out across the faintly moonlit fields. A low wind was sighing round the house and swaying the tops of the pines.

“And who are the people at the farm? Have you seen them?”

“The Hoadleys, man and wife. They have the keys of this place and I had to call there for them. They weren’t particularly forthcoming but they seemed harmless.”

“Could you go to them if you got in a hole? Have they a telephone?”

“Oh yes; I telephoned to the agent from there. It’s a little farm that used to belong to gentry, so I hear, but they got tired of it and the Hoadleys bought it. But I shan’t get in a hole; do I ever?”

He smiled, and pulled her ear. No, she did not get into holes; nevertheless, he mistrusted her feminine rashness and enthusiasm, her passion for the open air and flowers and picnic meals and her impatient overlooking of such details as damp rooms and inconvenient sinks.

“You won’t be completely isolated…” he muttered, turning away from the window and looking slowly round the walls, distempered an icy blue and stained with damp. “This really is a most depressing room, darling. Everything looks as if—as if——”

“It’s been underground for weeks,” she said cheerfully. “But the beds are really good and in the spring these woods will be brimming with primroses; you just wait! And Mrs. Prewitt is going to let us have Use of Linen and Cutlery.”

“Is that the owner? Who is she?”

“She went to Ireland in 1939 and just hasn’t come back. She owns several houses round here.”

“Are they all like this one?”

“Pretty much,” Alda said carelessly, smoothing her hair in front of the misty mirror. She had been too charmed by the situation of the cottage and the promise of those woods to pay much attention to a certain expression upon the faces of the Sillingham tradespeople, and a note in the voices of the Friends at Pagets, when she announced that she had taken Pine Cottage.

“Well,” Ronald said heavily, “I suppose we’d better be going. What are the children up to?”

Alda went out on to the landing, where there was the sound of giggling, and he slowly followed.

It added considerably to his depression that his family should have been victimised by a *rentier*. Naturally he did not share the Left view of *rentiers* as a class, but this specimen seemed to him to justify it. Pine Cottage had walls of single thickness and its doors and windows and fittings were cheap and mean. He thought of Pagets; built three hundred years ago, with an oak staircase solid as the decks of the ships upon which the original Friends had sailed for the New World; the house sunk deeply in its old, wide, sweet garden, and house and garden set secretly amidst the mild turnings of an ancient lane. He wondered (for his picture of the proletariat was Ruskinian rather than Marxian) that Mrs. Prewitt had been able to find Sussex workmen willing to throw her matchboarding and her bad bricks together, and he remembered how, when he looked out of a certain window at Pagets, his gaze travelled slowly up a massive, slabbed, sloping precipice, warmly grey as April clouds and fledged with emerald moss at the meeting of each slab and carrying little white flowers in spring; it was the roof of Horsham stone.

“What is all this?” he demanded, beginning to laugh as he came out on to the landing and found his wife kneeling

with her head close to those of her three daughters, and all in fits of laughter.

"Meg says——" began Jenny, lifting a pink face.

"Oh no, it's rude!" from Louise.

"——that when you sit on the seat in *there*," jerking her head towards an open door, "it——" she went off again and could not get a word out.

"Come on, Jenny, we don't want to be here all night," commanded Alda, putting an arm round the two eldest. "You then, Meg. What does it do?"

"FLIES up and smacks your botty!" shouted Meg, and off they all went again, the four fair heads close together and their laughter ringing through the house.

Ronald laughed too, but he told Alda that she had "better have that seen to," and the laurels in the front garden thinned, as well; it would make the living-room lighter and Mrs. Prewitt should be grateful. (Not that he wanted her gratitude, he added.)

Meg was asleep on his shoulder as they walked home through the winter moonlight. The way from Pine Cottage to Pagets was even rougher than the way from Sillingham to Pine Cottage and it became increasingly clear to Ronald that during the winter months at least his family (unless Alda made determined efforts towards a social life) would be almost completely cut off from what society the neighbourhood afforded.

2

ON A STILL morning some days later, Fabrio Caetano—of ITALY, as the flash on the shoulder of his uniform proclaimed—lay on his back amidst the stumps of oaks and birches in the middle of a sunny slope.

The slope was enclosed on all sides by woods; eighteen months ago a camp had been hidden there, and deserted huts stood in the thickest parts, and dumps of rusty petrol tins and other rubbish were being gradually revealed as the leaves fell from the blackberry bushes. A track ran straight through the middle of the north wood down to the main road a mile away, with its iron-hard mud monstrously rutted by the sprockets of tanks and blackened at intervals by fire, but that was all over now; the men with their casual blasphemy and jokes, and the alien spirit which came with them like another language although they talked in English, had gone away. Sussex people no longer drew in to the roadside to let the trucks race by, each delicately and instantly blazoning its nationality by a leaf or star painted upon its side; and the urgent sense that these men must take, or be given, everything that they wanted (space, the peace of the woods, food and drink and love) because at any moment they might have to go away to be killed, had gone too; and a robin was singing on its short flights from bough to bough.

An Italian lying in the sun! So many times that might have meant a dark face showing mere animal enjoyment of warmth or (since this was a prisoner’s face) a sullen relief

in temporary freedom, but this time, for once, the face whose eyes beneath their lowered lids were watching an insect moving along a leaf was sensitive: not with the nervous responsiveness that belongs to the faces of educated people, but in an older and simpler way difficult to paint in words. People would glance at Fabrio, as he passed them cycling back from his work to the camp, and think: “That one minds; he’s taken it to heart.”

He came from a tiny fishing village on the Ligurian coast, lonely in its loveliness and uncorrupted by the money of tourists; his father was very poor and ignorant but lived a satisfying human life because, at eighty, he was still a healthy, handsome old man and undisputed head of a large obedient family and because he owned a piece of land and also a boat; that boat came next in importance, in the Caetano household, to the land and to Gianni Caetano himself and far, far ahead of the family tradition that they were descended from a wicked and beautiful *principessa* of the old days who had been the mother of famous tyrants.

Fabrio’s childhood had been passed in a poor, dirty, noisy home where there was plenty of excitement and affection and plenty of food—*pasta*, and garlic and tomatoes cooked in oil, and small sweet peaches. The boat and the piece of land were responsible for all this abundance; the former was small, but it was seaworthy and sound, and Fabrio’s father could go fishing in it at night and bring home a netful of luscious tiny fish, enough to feed all nine of the Caetani for a day; or occasionally take out a party of tourists from the nearest port, into which he sailed twice a week (tourists were not so numerous, alas, since the coming of Il Duce, who did not want the foreigners to come and see how poor Italy was, and then this accursed second war).

The Caetani’s boat was the opposite number of the English odd-job man’s bag of tools or small van, making it possible for them to rely on their own efforts for their

sustenance rather than upon weekly salary packets and the caprices of an employer. Capitalist in a tiny way, Gianni lived outside the modern economic system; and some of the Caetano girls made lace and some made love, some of the boys fished and some of them hung about Pietro's garage and Giorgio's bench in the nearest port and learned a little about cars and a little about carpentry, and so they managed, not to exist, but to live.

For although there are slums in Italy and as bitter winds there as anywhere in the world, the Ligurian coast is sheltered and warm, and poverty and beauty, the ancient lovers, still go hand-in-hand there, lingering on in an ancient corner of the world. It is easier to be poor in the sunlight. Zola said so even of Rome, which endures more bitter winters than Fabrio's village ever knew; and if those who are most earnest for the education and comfortable housing of their fellow-men could have seen Fabrio and his brothers lying half-naked in the shadow of the brown sail of their father's boat, laughing and quarrelling over a few cigarettes or a handful of fruit, even they would have admitted that poverty does not always mean misery, and that in Europe, at least, those who have the gold of the sun find it easier to do without paper money.

But what, the Gentle Reader will ask, of politics? What of the Fascist Movement and Benito Mussolini, who came to power in the year that Fabrio, child of his father's old age, was born of a young second wife? Was it possible for any Italian, however poor and obscure, to avoid the pernicious scourge (or cleansing flame, as you please) that swept his country from 1922 to 1944? Yes, Gentle Reader, it was possible. Of course the Caetani sons joined the *Balilla* when they were seven and the *Avanguardia giovanile* when they were fifteen, and last of all the army got them and three of them were killed, but in the Caetani—in Fabrio especially—Fascism (an old idea) met something much older than itself. It met a deep indifference to ideas of any

kind. The Caetani did not have ideas; they felt; and what they felt about most strongly was life, not politics; food, not Fascism; their boat, not Mussolini's *Balilla*. They heartily agreed with every word that Mussolini was reported by rumour to have said, and forgot it the next minute. This very healthy attitude of mind, or rather body, prevented the Caetani from becoming what is called politically aware, and it also prevented them from attracting unwelcome attention from the local tyrantissimo at the port (who afterwards, we are pleased to relate, fell in the sea while drunk and was drowned). They also had a deep, cheerful sense of their own importance as individuals which made them more interested in themselves than in anyone else. That helped them to keep out of trouble, too.

So if the Gentle Reader was afraid of being told—at some length—how Fabrio at the age of eight felt a mistrust of the *Balilla*; which increased to a hatred of Fascismo and all its works when he joined the *Avanguardia giovanile* at fifteen; finally swelling into a dedicated purpose when he was taken into the army, and leaving him firmly established as an active one-man-Underground-Democratic-Movement at the age of twenty-three, the Gentle Reader need have no fears. Fabrio shouted when he was told to shout, like the rest of them, and went on living his secret life undisturbed.

He had been taken prisoner in Libya in 1943, and had now been at the camp in Sussex for two years. Since the end of the war in Europe he had been permitted, together with other Italians who professed themselves collaborators, much more liberty; and at the moment he and his fellow prisoner, Emilio Rossi, were supposed to be working, unsupervised, at clearing a ditch for Mr. Hoadley of Naylor's, but the morning was so warm, the still air so caressing, that Fabrio had stopped work some time ago and was lying among the bracken, doing nothing, while Emilio was busy on his own affairs down at the far end of the slope.

There had been no rain for some weeks and the rusty fern, the few large curled leaves lingering on the chestnut trees, the withered grass underfoot, and the twisted copper leaves of the oaks were dry; there were even primrose clusters with green shoots in their hearts along the bank where Emilio lay in the cavern made by roots of an ancient holly bush, his body curved round the dark hole of a rabbit burrow and his hand waiting, relaxed yet ready, above the burrow's mouth. He kept so still that he did not seem to breathe or to be alive; his very eyes were half-closed, and all he could see between his eyelids as he looked steadily downwards was the break in the bank where the burrow began. His brown uniform was the same colour as the autumn leaves.

Fabrio knew what his friend was after, and every now and then he turned on his side and gave a glance in his direction, but it was too much trouble to go rabbit-hunting; though he liked eating rabbits when they were cooked.

Presently there was a flicker, so quick that it might have been a shimmer of air, at the burrow's mouth. Emilio relaxed his hands and body and waited. Suddenly a young rabbit was sitting upright in the burrow's mouth against the sunlight. Its ears looked as if they were made of transparent pink satin edged by a tiny silver fringe. Emilio did nothing; he hardly breathed. The rabbit suddenly flicked back into the burrow. In less than a minute it came back again and took a few steps forward. It was not uneasy; this was the way it always came out from the darkness into the fresh scented air. It was so young that its bones and fur seemed liquid; mere fragility and silverness blent into warm, moving life.

For an instant it sat there sniffing, with delicate paws pressing the freshly turned soil, and then Emilio flung himself on it and gripped it between his small hands. It made one convulsive plunge and then a few weaker ones and at last lay limp. He had not pressed very hard.

Then he got up, brushed the leaves from himself, and walked slowly up the slope towards Fabrio, putting the rabbit in his pocket as he went.

“I got one,” he said in Italian.

“I know; I saw you.” Fabrio rolled over on his side and sat up, linking arms round his knees and looking up into his friend’s face. “I wasn’t asleep.”

“Shall we stew it? I’ve got the can down there,” jerking his head towards the ditch.

“What’s the time?” Fabrio glanced at the sun. “Not quite noon. All right, only we must be quick. *He* was telling *her* this morning that he was coming up here some time to look at our work. What about water?”

Emilio showed his yellow teeth in a laugh. “I’ve got that, too. I took a bottle from their cellar and filled it at the rainwater butt.”

“Your lighter wasn’t working last night.”

“It is now; *he* gave me a drop of juice.”

He held up a little metal object no bigger than a matchbox, carved with a dragon’s head in a vigorous primitive style and hinged and polished. He pressed it open and a tiny flame burned thinly in the sunlight.

“All right!” exclaimed Fabrio, jumping up, all his melancholy vanishing. “We’ll put it on to stew and do a bit of work while it’s cooking.”

“Ah-h-h! No, wait a minute,” said Emilio softly, in a changed tone. He glanced under his eyelids, towards the north face of the wood and Fabrio, following the direction of his stealthy movement, saw a woman, a little girl and a pram straying along by the edge of the trees. They were talking to one another and their clear voices in the unfamiliar language came down to the two men through the sunny stillness.

“She’s come to live at the villa near our farm. She wouldn’t say anything if she did see us,” said Fabrio, putting his hands in his pockets and beginning to stroll