

ECHOES

"He that hath a tiny wit,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
Must make content with his fortune's fit,
Though the rain it raineth every day."

CERTAINLY one could not stay in a more beautiful place, I thought, gazing round on the familiar landscape. In the foreground some kind of plant, with silver leaves and a flower like a mauve lamb-tail, trailed over the edge of the long high terrace, and displayed itself against the vast, transparent stretch of sea on which boats so obviously floated, for you could fathom the depths under them, that they seemed like water-beetles skimming a clear pool. Butterflies would poise themselves for an instant on the purple whips of the flowers, making them sway, and then would flutter and leap away again: while the hue of these fleecy, mauve flowers served to draw out of the sea every imaginable vibration of blue, wine-colour and green. Across this water lay a long, bare ridge of mountains, its outline and contours showing against the horizon like the spine and ribs of some vast, extinct leviathan wrecked there long ago in a tropical convulsion of the sea. But not only had the landscape this lateral perspective, it possessed in addition a vertical one, for looking up you saw first an overhanging precipice of rock, and then far above,

at the edge, the shapes of huge trees, looking from here as though they were rock plants, stooping over you.

At that moment the entire landscape roared at us like a lion. Well, that is its only disadvantage, one thought. After all, it had been obviously designed to give shelter to echoes, and indeed had been celebrated for them—even in England—at that period a long way distant ever since the time of Elizabeth. Only one could not help wishing that, as in Webster's play, the surroundings would twist the echo into something different, for, far down below, on a square raft of stone, decorated with a few dusty but very heated cannas and a dumpy local hero in bronze, the black-clad band was thundering and clashing out its inevitable patriotism. The lollypop pink-and-white houses, piled up against the tragic, majestic background, just as though a painted clown were pretending to prop up the walls of the Colosseum, redoubled the brazen bragging, while further away, and almost unnoticed, the pale-faced orphans of the last war, regimented as had been their fathers, and impersonally dressed in dwarf grey sailor-suits, or in little black silk shirts, were performing a series of menacing, ant-like gymnastics on one of the quays that guarded the waters.

All the flags were flying. "*Oggi é festa! Una gran' festa!*" everyone was saying. It was the fifth or sixth anniversary of the Great March. The new bridge (spanning the chasm created by the landslide), an imposing piece of engineering, with the Fascist Axe modelled on it, was to be opened at three o'clock. The decorations, it was rumoured, were unbelievable in their beauty. And the Prefect of the Province was

himself to be present at the ceremony. Up here in the old, white hotel, the maids were in a continual hot giggle of suppressed excitement, and the men-servants all loitered on the terrace, ostensibly in their eagerness to wait on visitors, but in reality to keep a wandering eye ready for any incident that might develop below.

How well one knew, and with what sympathy one recognized, this sensation of festa-expectancy that like a fever consumed them all! It had been experienced at school on whole holidays, this waiting for some grand, tremendous event, fit to honour the day. But, "fine before seven, wet at eleven," and all it had ever ended in was a black eye for somebody or on the morrow the rumour of an expulsion. One had learnt thus to distrust ceremonial days.

Meanwhile the traditional flights of echoes that haunt these valleys were circling and wheeling up in the air till the throbbing din became quite insupportable. Down below every motor-car panted, groaned, hooted and kept its cut-out open (in the hope of the owner that the noise it made would thus cause it to be deemed more of an expensive treasure than it really was), every bell in every slender tower put out its brazen tongue, cackled out its cracked music, there were many inexplicable convulsions of sound as though all the crockery in the town were being broken, the squatting children were indulging in an orgy of daylight squibs and crackers, the whole adult population was running and shouting, and from time to time a gun would go off or there would be a deep roar as part of the landscape would be blasted away. The Prefect must be arriving.

Somehow the noise and heat of the afternoon put us in no mood for either crowds or musical patriotic, and knowing that since everyone was on the sea-front the town must be empty, we burrowed our way down the dark steps through the rock-hewn corridors into the deserted piazza. Here we reached a quite different level of life. All was quiet. Music drifted in vaguely through the deep, white-washed arches that looked out onto the sea. The walls of the mountains rose endlessly over us. On a pedestal above the fountain in the centre of the open space, planted securely against his X-shaped cross, St. Andrew, with a rakish halo at the back of his head, his face upturned for the applause of the angels in the gallery, clasped like a Prima-Donna the huge bouquet of ice-cream-pink Amaryllis lilies which the fishermen had presented to him. Moreover, two or three fish, about a foot and a half in length and shaped like miniature sharks, made of white aluminium, with their bellies realistically darkened and spotted, dangled from his left wrist, bound to its crucifix. So, too, must Neptune or Poseidon have stood here once, bribed or rewarded—whichever the process may be—after the same manner. To further such pagan illusions, St. Andrew's feet were guarded by two undersized satyr-children in marble.

We quickly stole down the narrow main street, decorated with zigzags of tattered washing, that sloped up opposite him. As it trailed off into the landscape under arches, round corners, and by chapels, a stream of water which worked numerous mills higher up, was framed in at one side of it. The water,

falling in knife-thin, glossy sheets, yet contrived to curtain any sound for us, so that every echo of the band was muffled and our own conversation became that mouthing of goldfish to be observed in an airplane. Thus we were reduced to silent speculations born of the landscape.

• It was undoubtedly one for a race of enlightened Nietzschean giants. Precipitous as were the hills, they yet bore the burden of a thousand superimposed, minute realms and systems of life. Each ledge, terrace and tableland supported a population, possessed its own dialect, displayed a sharp and defined character, although from beneath these developments were invisible and unheard. Even the bony mountain tops that looked so desolate from where we stood, boasted a sweet, tinkling Alpine life of their own, which no one would have suspected. Up there were wide stretches of pasture land, with wooden houses and waterfalls and chestnut woods, innocent northern wild flowers, and fruit-trees and prosperous cows and sheep and goats, and ever over all was wafted up to Heaven the scented prayer of a wood fire. But from here the view was vertical again, and one from which no form of mountainous rhetoric had been omitted. There was every possible variety of flying buttress, every species of cavern, cave and grotto—the perfect stabling, for a tethered dragon: there were torrents, and wide arches and windows in the rock through which one could see the sky. Fragments of cloud were liable to catch at any rocky corner; and men had joined in this creation with the right spirit, had placed chapels in the jaws of caves, and turrets and towers on every

eminence. And down the steep, narrow ways, at one season paths, at another cascades, ran the swaying forms of the mountain-dwellers with the superb carriage born of head-burdens, moving caryatids bearing whole green trees upon their heads, till they put one in mind of Birnam Wood marching against Macbeth. Certainly there was here a quality out of which a race of giants could build itself . . . or perhaps be built ?

But to-day the paths were deserted, and the hot sirocco, not rain-bearing, but with a golden fleece of sunshine, brought out every scent that could be distilled by running waters from lemon and orange blossom, roses and myrtle and rosemary. And all this landscape, all this scent piled itself up as if to present a drama ; any drama, however puny, that might occur. No wonder that men were thus expectant.

So washed away was every noise under the falling water at our side, that we heard no sound until we turned a corner under an arch. There, very inappropriate in such a setting, were two men, much larger and better fed than most of them in the neighbourhood ; prosperous, kind-looking men of middle age, with gold watch-chains, heavy as the fetters that once weighed down the galley slaves, cutting their broad trunks in half. I could not at first, coming round the corner, see what they were laughing at . . . they were rosy and roaring with laughter . . . and then I saw that an idiot was hovering round them, with a beggar-hand outstretched for pence. This was a new one for me. I had thought that, after so many months in so many years, I had grown to know the

whole of this whining, ragged company—had learnt to tell their approach if only in order to avoid them. They had, in some fashion, one realized, to be reconciled with the Nietzschean magnificence that had given them birth and still framed them. There was, one imagined, an equal number of such pitiful monsters at home, but they were hidden away. The whited sepulchre again. Perhaps, even, it was more human to make them in some manner self-supporting—even if that self-support was the blackmail-harvest levied on pity and repulsion. And in Catholic countries they were kind to beggars. . . . Nevertheless there seemed so very many: and I had thought to know them all; there was the large-headed religious one, who ran down upon every feast-day from a village above, and made himself useful by heading ecclesiastic processions, holding a rose in his contorted mouth, and assuming an air of false but pompous authority; the jolly one who, always balancing a pitcher on his cone-shaped head, smiled, sang and held out his hand for coppers; the bald-headed Socrates; the old, bent witch with hooked nose and goitre; the typical tramp-cyclist; the one like a decayed curate; the terrible little crippled creature, legless, and armless, who hopped about on a board; the one who, upon seeing strangers, made the lazzaroni gesture, with hand to mouth, of eating macaroni, a gesture into which his idiocy instilled a most appalling quality of horror (a real, old-fashioned Neapolitan beggar, that one); the mumbling girl who herded geese and resembled Charles II of Spain; the old dustman, who would ever step out of his suffocating

golden cloud to display the revolting scar across his bald head ; and the man who walked along on hands and feet, his head held down, his body elongated and drawn up, in the manner of a grasshopper, or of a big ape hurrying down hill. All these were dirty and sordid, covered in filthy rags. But there was also an auxiliary : a volunteer, as it were : not a beggar, but an amateur : a rich, yellow idiot, ugliest of all, dressed in a much too smart, dark suit, who staggered and trembled and shook up and down the piazza or the promenade all day long, and who, as the child of wealthy parents, exacted from his fellow-townsmen, a certain amused and pitying respect. But this idiot, this new idiot before us, was different ; young, with his dark, sombre, perhaps even sensitive eyes, and high-coloured cheekbones, with the soft, dark fur of his young beard shading his chin—and giving him more the appearance of a young animal than a young man—he fawned, however stupidly, on the two men with an almost feline grace. He fluttered round them much as would an intoxicated wasp. His lunatic walk, the gentle spring of the cat-like, softly-treading feet, was possessed of a certain natural elegance, as of a wild creature. When he mumbled his incomprehensible sounds, it was as though an animal, even an intelligent animal, were to attempt speech. The whole aspect of him was at first sad and piteous rather than horrible. . . . Like an intoxicated wasp, I thought again, as I watched him stagger and flutter : and then it struck me that he was in reality, not only idiotic by nature, but also, temporarily, rather drunk. Some kind person had probably given him a patriotic

glass or two of wine with which to celebrate the great day. Moreover, he, too, I thought, was excited in the same way as were the servants up at the hotel; felt the expectancy born of *festa* in the air, awaited in his dumb way some wonderful personal happening, fit for the occasion.

Directly he saw us, he left off worrying the two Italian business men, or whatever they were, and attacked us, putting out his hand, and circling round us, getting in our way, like some sleepy insect. However sad, one could not help feeling, now that one was the object of his attentions, that there was a quality insinuatingly disgusting about his idiocy. He relied so much on his weakness. It was impossible to escape one felt, except by hitting out, as at a wasp. This stupid, never-ending whining exasperated the nerves, and almost frightened one. As he fluttered round us, the two men rocked with laughter, till the gold chains jingled over their paunches, and cried to us several times as we hurried on, "'Itt 'im, Mister;" a piece of advice the giving of which was so easily to be understood that it was all the more shocking. In our anxiety to be rid of him, we walked so fast that he could no longer execute the hindering manoeuvre upon which his whole system of tactics was founded, and, seeing it was hopeless, padded lithely back once more to harass and cringe before his former victims. And as we climbed the steps between the green tents of the lemon trees, we heard a shrill animal-cry, born of pain and terror. Doubtless the idiot had been "'itt." Well, one could not interfere. Nations have their own ways. The Italians are kind

to children, the Spanish to beggars, the English to animals. The sirocco grew stronger, and now exhibited the special peculiarity of that wind, for just as it had formerly distilled every sweet breath out of every flower, so, now reversing this aspect, it drew out of the ground every stench imaginable of filth, garbage and decay. Down below the band was thumping, banging and blaring out its patriotic message. A jovial breath of heavy bullying lingered on the air and gathered fresh impetus from every cave and hollow.

We climbed up higher among the crags and turrets of the rocks, spread among which, and cut off from us by high, broken, crenellated walls, were very level, very green lawns of grass. Here, too, was the ruin of the famous palace, one high tower of it still surviving. There was a quality at once superb, imminent and tragic about this brilliantly-lit and very scenic display : every time one walked through it, one had the sensation that the tragedy for which it was set must be beginning, the players always dressed and ready to walk on. And the little town, climbing each side of the rocky chasm, the little town that was so ancient and wasted for all its coats of pink and white paint, its laurels and bunting, seemed the very complement of the landscape. In spite of its colour, its many towers, some painted and inlaid with Persian bowls, others broken and grey, which lay from here flat against the water, never for a moment did it compete with this peacock-winged sea.

Now that we had climbed so far, the scent of myrtle and wood-smoke sharpened the air, though every

now and again a heavy puff of orange blossom, the flower-scent that travels further than any other, would be heaved up from below. Here we could separate the four elements of which this landscape was composed, the four tiers which it exhibited: pagan antiquity, Homeric sea-serpent-and-dragon, Elizabethan drama, and the magnificent sky-scraper scenery of the future. We had been almost too ashamed to mention the idiot before, but now we touched lightly on him for our own comfort. He could not really have been hit we said. People are too kind to do that sort of thing. And, of course, he was an intolerable nuisance. But the day was tiring, and we soon turned back.

The bands had now marched on, through the two tunnels choked with golden dust, toward the new bridge. The gully it spanned with such a brave leap would soon blare and drone with a brazen, semi-military glory. The town, then, ought to be quiet, for it would now surely have marched in mass to the bridge. We passed St. Andrew—also expectant with his pink lilies—and walking under a dramatic arch, approached the sea front. There was a small crowd, we found, still lingering on the stone raft where the band had been playing. It was composed mostly of stalwart young, with an outer fringe of eager children. We could not see what was the object of this interest, but almost certainly it must be one of the usual mountebank salesmen, direct descendant of the eighteenth-century carnival charlatans, who always appear in this part of the world as though by magic whenever there is a festa. To sell their wares,

they employ such diverse machinery as gramophones, stilts, fancy-dress and fortune-telling. They add to these every possible variety of personal trick: jumping, singing, shouting, dancing, leaping, talking, bawling, recitation and acrobatics: a strange survival amid so much anxious effort at modernity, but one still very popular and effective. But it was too hot to watch antics we had so often before seen executed, and we avoided the crowd, walking away down the quay, bordered along its whole outer length with huge, grey, dice-like blocks of cement.

The town, under its golden fleece of sunshine, looked particularly lovely, set in an amber glow that, it seemed, could never fade out. At this moment there was a tenderness, a sentiment in the faupal air that can sometimes be seen transcribed in the background of an Italian picture. The landscape, with its tremendous falls, shocks and surprises, was humanized, passed from majesty into a god-like comprehension. But my eyes were suddenly drawn down from the heights by a movement below. The crowd, a little bigger than before, but still infinitely small among all this vastness, was moving. It had opened up, it was running, this ugly black thing, towards the cement cubes nearest to it that bordered the sea. There was a tumult: and then its iron ring closed again. The scene was singularly familiar . . . and this familiarity, for which my mind hastily searched its corners, came back in a bar or two of music—phrases from the idiot-scene in *Boris Godounov*. And, then, in illumination, suddenly I understood. He had tried to escape from his

tormentors by throwing himself into the sea. But that was too easy a way out. Still the crowd kept up its performance. Now it was running back to its former position : probably they were bearing him back in triumph. The scene belonged more than ever to the greatest and gloomiest of Russian works. We almost strained our ears for the music : but all that reached us was still a recurrent breath of patriotism, which seemed to issue from varying parts of the towering rocks, but in reality was wafted from the distant band on the bridge. During this whole time we had been hurrying up to the crowd and now, reaching it, looked over their heads. Huddled up in the pool of water that was draining off his wet clothes, and set, it seemed, in the very heart of this sempiternal amber glow, his face cut and bleeding, in the centre of a jeering, kicking, prodding mob, hunched like the Dying Gladiator in the great antique Museum nearby, and also, appropriately enough, resembling the fatally wounded hero of some Italian opera about to sing his last farewell, crouched the feline-looking idiot who had worried us an hour earlier. Every now and then he swayed a little nearer the ground, as though seeking for refuge in it, the monster that had given him birth and would take him away again. He took no notice now of his tormentors, but his dark, velvet eyes were full of a vague, ineffable sadness that saw no one, the sadness of a child who cannot explain, and by means of this subtle suffering triumphs. He did not talk or answer or cry, but softly moaned to himself as it were a dirge : for the moaning was sequent and

musical. The band was thundering away (perhaps the Prefect at this moment was performing the ceremony). The crowd taunted and kicked him every instant with renewed vigour, but it was impossible now to goad this forlorn animal into any self-assertion, and the only thing about him with which they could now amuse themselves was this dumb misery. Particularly attentive to the whole affair was the jaundiced, rich idiot in the dark, smart suit, staggering, making faces and enjoying himself immensely. He seemed to bring to bear on the situation a quite unusual concentrative power. His limbs were twitching with pleasure, like those of a retriever that scents game. As for his poorer colleagues, they, of course, were absent for the afternoon, called away to the company of the bridge, otherwise, no doubt, they too would have displayed a certain interest. Now, again, a movement swept through the crowd. The drenched creature, still moaning and looking at the ground, had been shaken on to his feet, and was being frog-marched by his jovial, laughing torturers (no harm in any of them, as the phrase goes) through an arch inset in the whitewashed back-scene.

His rich, ugly counterpart followed the black tail of people. The interest, the delight even, reflected in his eyes and face was the only expression I have seen them contain. It may have been, perhaps, that he was immersed in some philosophical consideration. He may have known that he was treated with respect as the child of rich parents, and that only this respect saved him from a similar fate to that which he now beheld in progress before him. He may have realized,

further, that if you are beneath the level of the crowd, either in brain or body, it is well to keep in with it. Now the mob struggled through the arch, and every crag, turret and pinnacle suddenly thundered and throbbed once more with the battle-hymn.

As we ascended the numerous steps to the hotel, the dust rose up in pillars and clouds to us, till it seemed as though, however high we climbed, we could never emerge from it. The smell, too, from below, was insupportable. At the top, however, the terrace lay before us with its orange-trees, and fountains and garden scents. The nice porter, in his blue coat, welcomed us back. He had not been able to get away himself, but had we, he asked, seen the festa, and its decorations, heard the music? (here the band gave such a loud and sudden bellow that for the moment conversation was held up). The Prefect had been there in person, it was said. The new bridge was now open. Soon the road would be finished. *Piano . . . piano*. One could not hurry too much . . . but things were moving, all the same. The road nearly ready, and—magnet, that, for American visitors—running hot and cold water in all the bedrooms. *Piano . . . piano . . . little by little*. One could not hurry too much. . . . And five new bathrooms. . . . And for all we knew next year, it was said, there might be a funicular . . . *piano . . . piano . . .* but things were moving. And he smiled a radiant, child-like smile.

We gazed round on the familiar landscape. Certainly one could not stay in a more beautiful place.