

Chapter 27

Pretty soon after my first Leo died that darling Miss May got me the job to come every day to do the cleaning in the settlement house. Then Gionin got the good job sweeping the floor for the electric company. And after not long we got to be the janitor in that building where they didn't want the Italians. I had to scrub down the stairs once a week and do a little work like that, and we got the rent for half. We went along good that way. But I had a lot of worry too, because I was all the time gone to my work and my children were alone on the street. My Visella was eight or nine years old and she had to be the mother to the other children. And I had more trouble because the landlord in that new building was so mean. He was all the time beating the children. One day he kicked Visella and beat her terrible because she was playing house in the back alley and moved some boxes he didn't want moved. I was afraid to tell Gionin because he would start fighting with that boss. But I was crying one day when Miss May came in my house. I said, "If only I can have a little house of my own so those men can't lick my children."

She said, "How much do you think it would cost, Mis' Cavalleri?"

I said, "Oh, it costs lots-about a thousand dollars!"

The next week she came back and she said to me and my husband, [end page 233]

"If I borrow you the money to buy a little house do you think you can pay me back like rent? "

"Oh, no!" Gionin said. "That much money I can't take for a debt!"

And I said no too. I can't sleep with the debt. But she meant it, that good Miss May. She trusted us and wanted to do it. She was a rich lady but she used to love me. She was the one who slept in my house the time my Leo was born. And later she'd give me much pleasure when she'd come in my house and eat. She'd come in and see the onions and she'd say, "Oh, Mis' Cavalleri, I just love the onions! I want an onion sandwich." And she'd go out and buy a lot of butter and some bread and come back and eat with me.

The residents in the settlement house now are not like in those old days. Now they all have their own work and go their own way. They're all pleasant and nice. They come in the kitchen Sunday night and say, "How you are, Mis' Cavalleri? If we help with the dishes will you-tell us a story?" But it's not like in the old days when everyone was one family.

Me, I was always one that liked to entertain the people. So every noon I used to tell a story to the other cleaning women in the Commons when we-were eating our lunch in the kitchen. In that time I didn't talk much English but I acted those stories so good that they understood anyway. I made those women bust out laughing when I told some of those funny stories from the barn in Bugiaro. One day Mis' Hill, the housekeeper, came in and heard me telling. She was so crazy for the way I told the story, she went and told Dr. Taylor. Then Dr. Taylor found me one night and said, "Come in the parlor, Mis' Cavalleri, and tell the story to the residents."

Me, I felt like one penny the first time I went in before all those high-up, educated people, and I had to talk half in Italian. But I was so reverent and

acted the story so good that when I was the sister seeing the Madonna come alive all those residents raised up from their chairs with me. Aad oh, I wish you could see how they laughed when I told the funny stories! After then I all the time had to tell the stories to everybody-to the Woman's Club, to the man's meeting, to the boys' [end page 234] party, to the girls' party, to everybody. Sometimes when they had the big meetings in Hull House they would tell me to come there. One time that university in Evanston made me come there and tell stories to those teachers who were going to school to learn the storytelling. I went everywhere. But always some resident-one of the teachers from the Commons-had to go with me, because I didn't know how to go alone. I loved to tell the stories. I never said no.

Gionin, oh he was glad when I told the stories. So for practice I used to test them on him first. If he listened good-if I made him laugh or made his tears fall, then I knew I said them good. Sometimes he went with me to those parties in the settlement; but when I went up to tell the story, he went out of the room. He couldn't stay in, he was so afraid I'd make a mistake. He was more excited than me. But then after a while sometimes he used to stay in too. And he was proud how the people were enjoying to hear me tell.

Me, I was always crazy for a good story. That's why I love so much the dramatics. If somebody says to me, "Leave the supper and take the show," I'll take the show every time and let the eating go. I just love the drama! After I got the job to go every day to the settlement for the cleaning, and Gionin had the job with the electric company, we got along better. My children got bigger

too. So then I used to hide a little money from the food so I can go to the shows. That one afternoon in the week I had home from the scrubbing I hurried up and did my washing and prepared the supper; then I'd run. But sometimes the show was long, and I'd see it start to get dark. I'd have such a scare I'd run all the way to get home before my husband came. I was going in the front door and quick put on the apron, because Gionin came in the back door-from the back street through the alley. Once he caught me. It was that time he was working in the night. As soon as he started for his work, I put on my shawl and I beat it. The snow was to my knees, but I didn't care, so long as I could see the show. But Gionin came back again-he forgot his little knife. He said, "Where's Ma? Where's Ma?"

Visella said, "Oh, she'll be right away back. Probably she ran to the store."

I used to go to the drama on Clark Street. I walked way out on [end page 235] Clark Street near Grand Avenue. The first drama I saw was Hamlet. I always did like that drama. Laura Alberta, she was the actress that made all those dramas in that New America Show on Clark Street. She used to play good plays-only good plays. Oh, all the shop girls were going behind by the stage door and watching to see her come out. And she used to talk nice to those poor girls. Then she used to come to our church. Sunday morning after the mass the people were outside waiting and looking, like she was God coming out.

Once I begged Gionin so much to take me to a show, and I was doing this, and doing this, and everything he liked to please him and make him go. So when we came out it was late, and I was hustling up so we can get a good seat. He said,

"To other places you can't walk, your leg hurts you so much; but to the show you can run."

The Folding of the Flag-something like that-it was a kind of a war show, we saw that time. But my husband was not like me; he didn't care so very much for the show. In that show they had beautiful scenery-beautiful! I remember they had all that paper scenery. Now no more. After that big fire the government won't allow it. Me, I took my Visella and went to see that big fire-the Iroquois fire, where the theater burned up. We didn't see the fire but we saw after, when they were shoveling the dead people on the wagon. And then we had the nerve to go right away to the show on Clark Street. (I'd like to know what they did with that New America Show. It's not there anymore.)

Yes, I was always a friend with the shows. I used to go over on Milwaukee Avenue and see the nickel show. Oh, I remember one little bit of a place with two rows of chairs and no air-but that was later when they made the moving pictures.

After five or six years the police found out it was not a fit place to go in, and they locked it. Some of those other places where I used to go the police came and closed too, because they were dangerous for fire. Then there was one show near the settlement house that was not right. There were some Italian men that came out on the stage and said jokes to make everybody laugh. But they said wrong things too-all kinds of dirty things that the men like. Two of those teachers from the Woman's Club they told me one day to come with them to that place. They wanted me to interpret [end page 236] so they know what it was. They thought it was not right, but they had to know it to tell the government to shut

it up.

But me, I didn't want to snitch. Those men were Sicilian, but they were Italian people anyway, and I was thinking maybe they didn't want to say those bad things-probably they had to say them to get the living for their children. So I said to those ladies, "Better you take somebody else, because those men are talking the Sicilian, and I don't understand very much."

So then I went to that Maurice myself-he was the boss of the show-and I told him he'd better look out and stop those dirty jokes. But he kept on just the same, and the government came and closed his show.

That Jew man that has the little moving-picture show across from my house now, he's good to me. When it's a nice picture he comes by my house and says, "You want to come tonight or tomorrow night, Mis' Cavalleri? It's a swell picture." And when he sees me come, he lets me buy the ticket and go right in the door ahead of everybody. He knows I can't stand in that line of people with my bad leg. When it's a bum picture, he doesn't tell me to come. He never tells me to come to those pictures where they won't let the children in. In those pictures I have to close my eyes almost the whole time to not make a sin.

Ten summers I took my children and I went to the Commons summer camp to cook for the boys. In the early time we had only the tents at camp. Every boy that came new had to go by the farmer and fill up his mattress with straw. When it rained those boys were in their bathing suits in the night. And in that big tent for the dining room, it was raining down in the sugar bowl in the middle of the table. And when it stormed with the wind, all the boys-about seventy boys-were

hanging on that post in the middle so the dining room wouldn't blow away. Oh boy, think of the joy I had in that camp when they made the wooden house for the dining room, and the big barrel for the water! Oh, I remember one summer, such a trouble I had cooking for sixty boys when I had only two little gasoline stoves! I had to put the oatmeal on the night before to be ready for breakfast. Then I couldn't sleep because when the wind came it all the time blew out [end page 237] the light. Mr. Witter, he was so sorry for me he went in town to the company to find out how much it would cost for a gas stove. The company said, "If you dig the ditch yourself, it will cost much less."

So here Mr. Witter came back and called all the boys together on the hill. When he told them, they were so glad if they can help me. They said, "Yes, we're going to do it!"

When I saw all those boys digging the ditch I said, "Why you do that? Somebody can fall in."

Mr. Witter said, "Well, we make the ditch so the water will run off."

When the ditch was made, here came some men with the pipe and in one-half hour they had in a big gas stove-not a really stove, but four nice burners. Wasn't that a grand surprise! I went by Mr. Witter with my two arms out like a cross and I said, "Oh, Mr. Witter, if you were not a man, I would kiss you!" And all the boys busted out laughing. I was so happy! In one hour I had the whole supper made.

Those boys liked me so much because I told them the stories, and they were tickled to death to dig the ditch for me. They all the time were begging me.

They'd say, "Oh, Mis' Cavalleri tell us the story! We'll help you get through your work. We'll scrub the barrel! We'll bring the water! We'll wash the dishes! Come on, tell us the story!"

One summer Dr. Taylor let some Jew boys come to camp with the Italian boys. In the first beginning those boys were like the Devil and the Holy Ghost together! And such a war they put up! They pushed out the clothes to each other from the tents. But in the end they were worse than sweethearts. When it came the end of two weeks they could even kiss each other-Jacob and Luigi, Tony and Sam. But whether they were Jews or Italian they all begged me to tell them the stories. And they all busted out laughing.

Me, I can't tell the stories so good like those men in the barns in Bugiaro.

And the American people can't laugh like the people of Bugiaro. When I heard that a lot of my paesani had come to America and were living in Joliet I wanted so much to go there. But I was afraid to go alone. So one day that darling Miss May she bought the tickets and went with me. And we saw all those girls from the silk mills-Caterina too-and the men who told stories in the barns. [end page 238]

Miss May, she never forgets me. Whenever she comes to Chicago she right away comes and finds me. Oh, I have to tell how she came back in the wartime and preached against the war. She was a rich woman and she hired a hall herself to preach to the young men. She told all those young men that war is wrong, and it's better they go to jail than go and fight other young men. Dr. Taylor was signing the young men to go to war there in the settlement house, and Miss May

hired the hall to do the preaching and tell them to don't go. Miss May knew my Luie so well, so she came and told him not to go. So he was listening to her, he liked her, and he didn't want to go anyway. He got the papers, but he didn't go. So here came the police to take him. Luie said, "No use for me to go, I can't shoot nobody. I'm a coward-I'm afraid to shoot somebody. They'll shoot me first." But the police took him anyway. They made him go.

When those boys with Luie went on the ocean many days, the boat stopped and everybody looked to see Paris. Some said, "You see all those high buildings? Now we'll get off the boat in Paris, France!"

But one said, "I think I've seen this place before. I don't think it's Paris.

Sure, I remember that statue. It's New York!"

And sure enough, I guess they got the word the war is over when that boat was halfway across the ocean, so they brought all those soldiers back to America.

But they didn't tell the men nothing-the men didn't know they turned around.

Oh, I was all the time crying when Luie went. I thought they would send him away and kill him. One night after we went to bed the telephone rang, and when Mr.

Cavalleri answered, there it was Luie talking on long distance: "Hello Pa!

Hello! How's Ma? I'm coming home pretty soon. I jumped off the train to talk on the telephone in the station. Hello, Ma! I've got to go or I get caught.

Good-bye. I'm coming home pretty soon." That was the happiest moment I had in my life-the same happiness as when the baby is born. I hope there'll be no more war-never! My darling Miss May, I think she said true-it's wrong to send the young boys out to kill other young boys! I hope there never, never is another

war!

Miss May, she's an old woman now too, but she never forgets to [end page 239]
come and see me when she visits Chicago. Yes, the residents they are different
entirely now than in the old time. Some they smile in my face and call, "Hello,
Mis' Cavalleri, hello! Hello! How you are? Tell us a story," all pleasant and
nice. But they don't get acquainted like in the old days. I just love Chicago
Commons. I hope I'll never stop coming. But it's different now. The old Commons,
when everybody was like one family, is gone. [end page 240]