Introduction

Rosa Cavalleri--Mrs. C. as everyone called her--was in her fifties and I in my early twenties when I came to live at Chicago Commons, a settlement house on the corner of Grand Avenue and Morgan Street, at the end of World War I. My husband had died in a war-training camp a few weeks after our marriage and friends had persuaded me to leave art and become a social worker. For this, they said, I needed to finish my degree at the University of Chicago and get training at the Graduate School of Social Service Administration. Also I must live in a settlement house. Hull House, where they had lived, they thought too sophisticated for me. They advised Chicago Commons, which was smaller and had a more familylike atmosphere.

I had just moved into the Commons and was in my little room at the top of the annex when Mrs. C. found me there weeping. I never mourned except when I was alone, but this time I was caught. She had come through from the men's side of the building where she had been cleaning and I had not heard her. Rosa's efforts to comfort me seemed strange at first-she just sat down and started telling me one of the folk tales she knew from her childhood in Italy. From that day on Mrs. C. and I became staunch friends. For the next thirteen years-with the exception of one year when I was away helping [end page 3] organize a child-health program in Czechoslovakia, and another period of some months investigating living conditions of miners in coal camps of West Virginia and Kentucky for the U.S. Coal Commission-Rosa and I saw each other almost every

day. And even after I remarried and left the Commons in 1931 we visited back and forth until she died in 1943.

Mrs. C., as she liked to tell everyone, was the first neighbor Chicago Commons had helped. Dr. Graham Taylor, founder and head resident of the Commons, and his eleven co-workers, had just moved into the old brick building on Union Street in 1894 when Mrs. C. came to the door angry and weeping. She and her family, along with all the other families who had been living in the building, had been forced to move when the settlement rented it. The neighborhood at that time was mostly Norwegian, Irish, Dutch, and German - and no one wanted to rent rooms to Italians. The Cavalleris had had to move into the basement of an old saloon and it flooded every time it rained. This made Mrs. C. so angry that she went back to the new people scolding and weeping, and although she could only speak a few words of English, she made them come and see how she and her husband were scooping water out of the rooms by the pailful. She knew of a nice building a few blocks over that had empty rooms, big and sunny, and the rent was no more, but the landlord had refused to rent to Italians. The people from the Commons not only got her these nice rooms and moved her in the same day, they even paid the necessary month's rent in advance. "But I paid them back in two weeks," she would tell me. "I can't live with a debt! Never!"

From that time on Mrs. C. had been Chicago Commons' most devoted friend and neighbor. She came to their evening classes and social groups, and as soon as the Commons could afford hired help she stopped cleaning floors in the saloon and washing clothes for a group of plasterers and came every day to work in the

Commons. Most days she cleaned the rooms of the residents, but soon she also substituted for the cook on the cook's day off. And it was here in the Commons' kitchen while eating lunch with the other cleaning women that she started telling her stories. The housekeeper heard her one day and told Dr. Taylor. And Dr. Taylor insisted on taking her into the residents' [end page 4] parlor one evening after vespers and having her tell a story to the residents. From then on Rosa's fame as a storyteller had grown so that by the time I met her in 1918 she and her storytelling were known to all the settlement houses in Chicago, as well as to various women's clubs downtown and to classes in storytelling at several universities in the area. She never went alone to these places-someone from the Commons always went with her. And she was never paid. She did it because she loved to.

Rosa liked to tell about one large gathering at Hull House where Jane Addams spoke first. Next Dr. Taylor spoke, and then "the big somebody" from Washington for whom the meeting had been called. But the audience was restless and didn't listen. Then she, Rosa, got up and started telling a story. For her the audience came to life. They sat up and clapped and laughed and shouted for more. Dr. Taylor told her afterwards that he wished he could make the people listen to him the way they listened to her. "Don't worry, Dr. Taylor," she told him. "You did good too."

After I came to the Commons Mrs. C. used my room for all her rest periods. "You're home, Mis' Mary? I disturb you? " I would hear her say as she came up the last flight of steps. She was always panting by that time, for she was very

heavy-twice the size of an average woman. "When the residents give me their old skirts," she would say, "I have to sew two or three of them together to make one big enough for me." But she just laughed. Her weight and old clothes didn't worry her. For aprons she would patch together squares of their old gingham dresses. And nearly always she wore a neckerchief pinned with a safety pin, for in her girlhood in Bugiarno to expose a naked neck was a sin.

Once when Rosa was to tell a story to a large women's club downtown, her married daughter hired a seamstress to make her a dress. It was made of black broadcloth with a pink satin vest and belt. "And only when it was all made," Rosa would laugh as she told me, "I find out I have to pay for it myself. Me, I thought she was giving it to me." But Rosa didn't wear that dress very much. She felt more "comfortable" in her old clothes.

Rosa's big, beautiful eyes often looked sad when she was sitting alone, but sparkled with life when she was with anyone, and changed [end page 5] from one expression to another when she was acting out her stories. She wore her naturally wavy dark auburn hair in a simple knob on top of her head. Her shoulders were somewhat narrow and stooped from so many years of hard labor, but her hips and legs were so heavy that she found it hard to stand and walk. As she grew older she sat on a chair on the platform when telling her stories and used a cane when walking.

Evenings if I was in my room and had time she would tell me stories or talk about her early life. If I was not home or had studying to do she would sit by the window counting off prayers on her rosary and dozing. Days when she was

staying for an evening club or was to tell a story at some gathering she would wash up in the bathroom down our hall and change her blouse and skirt there, for she had now moved too far out on Grand Avenue to go home and get back in time.

About 1927 or 1928, when ill health made me give up social work, I went back to art. I studied some more, this time at the Art Institute, and later under Frederick Poole, a member of the Royal Academy of Arts of London. One of my first assignments at the institute was to draw a picturebook for children. I had had some experience making up stories for a young nephew in Wisconsin, and I thought it fun, so for this assignment I not only drew the pictures, I wrote the story too. The result was Mister Penny. When this was published, Rosa was excited. She wanted to help me publish other books and offered to tell me more of her stories.

Most of the stories she told she had heard as a child in Bugiarno, a silkmaking village not many miles from Milan where she had been born. (The names of the Italian villages and of Rosa and her friends have been changed throughout this book.) She had been left at a hospital there the night she was born, and the hospital had farmed her out to a peasant woman in Bugiarno the next day. On winter nights the poor people would gather in a barn to be warmed by the animals. The men stayed way back in the straw with the animals, and the women knitted on a bench at one side with a single candle for light. It was the men who told the stories and they liked funny ones to make people laugh. Rosa liked the funny ones too, though she told me she [end page 6] sometimes feared Americans might think she and the peasants irreligious for telling jokes about

the priests.

So, little by little, as she rested in my room I took her stories down. In the days of Rosa's childhood the poor could neither read nor write, so the stories they told were all traditional. Of course Rosa added new parts to make them more interesting, and she acted them out vividly, but when written down these stories held little that would interest moderns. It was the amazing story of her life and of the fears and superstitions and-beliefs of the people of her village that interested me. These did seem worth taking down and passing on. And Rosa was anxious to have me do so.

Since Mrs. C. could read and write no English and very little Italian, she could make no notes. She just had to tell me things as she remembered them, and let me put them in order. First I took down her words in heavy dialect, as she spoke them. But this proved too difficult for the reader. Thus in this more recent version I have corrected and simplified the text, trying at the same time not to lose the character and style of her spoken words.

She loved telling me the story of her life and of the life in her village. The only thing she refused to tell was the name of her real mother, "a great actress," who lived in Milan, for she said everyone in the world would know that name. "I was born to do the acting like my mother," she would say-and I'm sure she was. "But God didn't want it. He wanted to save me for heaven in the end."

[end page 7]

Chapter 22 [excerpt]

About one o'clock night I came in the big station in Chicago. No one was there

to meet me and I didn't know I could stay there in the station. I went right through and came out in the street. (It was good I didn't think I could stay in the station, because the policemen, they had the telegram already to arrest a young Italian woman with the shawl over her head and two children. I didn't know then about the police, but they couldn't catch me anyway, because I was right away out in the street.) So I was out there in the street in the night and I was talking to my Francesco and my Domenico in Italian. I said, "Oh, children, what are we going to do? Where are we going to go?" And [end page 200] then I was praying, "Oh God help me! I don't know where I'm going to go! Oh Madonna, You pray for me! "

I always was praying. And it is true-I don't remember one time when I asked for something with all my heart and I didn't get it from God. I pray God and the Madonna and all the time I get my prayer!

So I was standing there in the street praying and the man in a little fruit store heard me. He came out and he said, "Lady, I'm Italian too. Don't you know where you go? "

Oh, I was happy when I heard that man talking in Italian! He was talking Toscano like Gionin. I said, "Well I've got the name and the number for one Toscano man, but I don't know where to go. Do you know him? His name is here."

"Well I don't know," he said. "But I'll take you near on the streetcar. I'll take you by one other Toscano that has a fruit store up Milwaukee Avenue."

So we came on the streetcar near to Chicago Avenue. Then that man had to change to another streetcar to go home, but he showed me where to go. I went in the

fruit store he showed me and I found another Toscano. So I showed him my paper with the address and asked him where to go.

He said, "Yes, I know that man. You're going to go about three blocks up this way. You walk this street till you come by one store where are the coats and the hats for men in the window. Next to that you'll see a little gate with three steps going down. You go in that gate, then you go way back behind the store and you'll find the back door to that man you want."

Me, I was kind of scared in the night like that, and I was afraid I couldn't find it. I ask that Toscano if I could just stay there in his store till the morning. But I guess he was afraid to have me there with two children. He said he had to close the store. So then I went. I walked those three blocks and past the store I found that little gate. I went in and way back in the dark till I found the door with a little piece of roof over, like he said. I put down my bundle and I started to knock on the door. Bump-bump, bump-bump, I was knocking and it sounded so loud. But nobody came.

I sat down on the step with Domenico sleeping in my arms and [end page 201] Francesco holding my dress. Then it started to rain. It poured rain. About an hour we stayed there and we were getting so cold-my children were crying with the cold. I said, "Oh, I'm going to knock again," and I began to pound and pound.

Pretty soon, sure enough, I heard a noise inside-somebody was coming. They hollered through the door, "Who is it?"

I said, "Rosa, the friend of Gionin. Rosa Cristoforo."

"Oh yes, yes! " They opened the door. "Yes, sure we knew about you from Gionin. Come in. Come in. We knew you would come but we didn't know when." So then they made some coffee, because we were wet through and so cold, and they made me and my children go to bed and rest. They were very good and very kind, because they were good friends and cousins with Gionin-they came from the same town in Tuscany.

But after one or two days I didn't like to stay no more with two children and make them so much bother. So I asked them where I could go to find work and the room to stay in. They sent me by some other Toscani who were working in the plaster, making the statues for the cemetery and all those ornament things.

There were sixteen men and they said they would give me five cents each to wash their shirts.

Those shirts, I had to take the knife and scrape before I could wash them, and then I was rubbing all the skin off my hand. But I was glad to have those sixteen shirts. I got eighty cents a week. Oh, that was good to have! Then I found one restaurant to scrub the floor.

Three days I stayed by those good Toscana people. Then here came Gionin. [end page 202]

Chapter 23

Gionin found three little rooms for me in a big wooden house by the railroad. There were about ten Norwegian families in that house and two Italian men, Toni and his old father. Toni, he was North Italian like us but he was Genovese. He was a nice young man-short, but he was pretty with black hair and gray eyes. He

was one of those artists that put down the marble to make the mosaico. That old father had a hand-organ, but he was too old and sick to go very much on the street. They were in one of those three rooms when we came, so we let them stay and help pay the rent-we were all North Italian together.

Gionin, he had a little money from the mine at Union so he could pay the rent. Then he bought a little secondhand stove and some wood and coal. The table he made himself from some boards he found in the street, and he made the bed too. But no chairs. For chairs we were sitting down on those big American Family Soap boxes. Then we had to buy some blankets. But Gionin was afraid to stay there with me-he was afraid the police would come. So he was sleeping by some of those other Toscani and by his cousin Tomaso.

The other people from Toscana were not religious, but Gionin never missed one Sunday to go to church. So here it was the first Sunday in Chicago and we didn't know where there was a church. Oh [end page 203] my goodness! We walked and walked and walked and walked and all the time asked somebody else, but everybody kept saying, "You're going right. It's far." We went way to that church on Franklin and Illinois. Me and my children froze to death walking. But we never even thought we could take that streetcar with the horse on. I was in America ten years and I never took the streetcar. We needed those five cents to eat. Five cents was enough to make the whole supper for the family in that time. Only the rich people could take the streetcar not us poor people.

After not long Gionin found work. The first work he had in Chicago, he was carrying the bricks and mud for the new church they were making over past

Chicago Avenue. It's a Polish church now but in that time it was Irish. He used to come by me with his shoulders all sore-all open-from carrying those bricks and I was making him some cotton-cloth pads to put on his shoulders so they don't get so cut. And every noon I used to carry him a little pail with the stuff to eat.

But sure enough! One day I was home doing the washing-I was bending over my tub scrubbing and rubbing those plaster shirts and with my foot rocking the cradle because my Domenico was sick and all the time crying-and here came the policeman to take me to jail. I couldn't understand much what he said so he talked to Toni. Toni told the police I was not the kind of woman he said and I didn't run around with no man. He said, "Don't take her to jail. She's an angel from heaven the way she works and takes care for her children!"

The police could see when he looked how I was doing all that heavy washing and taking care for my sick Domenico. So he said he didn't want to arrest me-he thought it would be a mistake. But then he told Toni I had to be in the court tomorrow morning. He said if I promised to be there and didn't run away he wouldn't put me in jail. He was good, that policeman. He didn't arrest me and he gave me fifteen cents to get some kind of medicine for Domenico. He wrote it on a paper what kind of medicine I must get from the drugstore.

So the next day I was in the court with my two children. Gionin and all his friends came there with me. Toni too. There I was, a young Italian girl with a shawl over my head, and I couldn't understand nothing. When we went by the judge, there was Santino from [end page 204] Missouri! He was telling the judge

that I was the worst kind of woman-that I ran away and was living with all the men, and this and that. He wanted the judge to punish me and put me to jail.

I can't tell you very much what happened, because the judge was talking English to all those friends of Gionin and to Toni. When he asked me the question Toni told me what it was and I answered the truth, that's all. In the end the judge told Santino to get out of town. He said if he was not gone by six o'clock the same day he would put him to jail instead of me. Then he said, "And don't you ever come back, either!"

Six o'clock night, when the train was supposed to leave for St. Louis, Gionin and all his friends and all his relatives in Chicago were there in the depot with stones. If Santino didn't go they were going to stone him. When Santino saw all those people taking my part he had no intention to stay. He went back to Union. He went back there and got the divorce; then he married one of those women he was living with. But I heard later from his sister-in-law that that woman wouldn't take so much like me. When he started beating her she got him put in jail. He sat in jail twenty months for one beating he gave that new wife!

That man, I have to leave him out of my story, that's all.

So after Santino had the divorce Gionin and me went to the court in Chicago and got married together. The priest said he couldn't marry us in the church because I had that first husband living-only when he died we could be married in the church. Me, I was crying with tears coming down my eyes and praying God, "Oh God, why do You make it a sin for me to live with this good man Gionin? He's so good and so religious! My children will starve if he doesn't take care! Why do

You make that a sin? How can that be a sin?"

Once a long time after, when Father Alberto came to America, I went by him and told him how I didn't say yes that time I was married with Santino in Bugiarno. I told him the priest was deaf but the people knew it that I didn't say yes. He said, "Well, if you can find all the people who were at your wedding and they sign their names on the paper that you didn't say yes, then I can marry you in the church."

But how am I going to find all those people? I can't, that's all! [end page 205]

(After Gionin and me were married together about ten years and have already three children, a missionary from Italy came in our church. He preached so strong against the divorce-what a sin it is against God, and the punishment God is going to give those people, and all and all-that Gionin got the scare and he went away and left me. About three months he left me alone to take care for all those children. Nobody but me knew why he went away that time, but I knew it was all the missionario's doing. So then one day he went to confession to Father Alberto and Father Alberto told him it's a sin to leave me alone like that with those children. Oh, Gionin was glad to hear that, so he could come back! He said he only left me because he didn't want to go to hell.)

My husband he was many months carrying the bricks and the mud for that new church. But then those other Toscana people-that little bunch of Toscani were all very friends together-they said to him, "Oh, you're foolish, Gionin. Why you don't get the horse and wagon and sell the bananas like us?"

So he did it-he got the horse and the wagon and he used to peddle the bananas.

And when the cranberries came he sold the cranberries too.

Oh, now I remember another little thing to tell. One time Gionin bought a new horse and he came home and told me about it. He said he changed in the old one and he gave some money too for another one. He said, "Rosa, I bought a nice horse this time. But I don't know if I did right. There was another horse there for ten dollars more-it was still a nicer one. What d'you think? "

And I said, "Well, if you think it's worth ten dollars more you give it to him."

But we didn't say no more about it. We went to sleep and we think no more. So in the morning my husband took the bananas and the horse and wagon and he went.

Then here came a Toscana man and he said, "Lady, you're the wife to Gionin?

"Yes."

"Well Gionin, he said for you to give me the ten dollars because he wants to go by Guido and take that other horse." [end page 206]

And I said, "Why do you come for the ten dollars? Why did he send you and not come himself? "

"Well he sent me because he wanted to wait there on Franklin Street."

"Well," I said, "can't that other Toscana man give the horse, anyway, and trust my husband for ten dollars? If Guido won't even trust him one day, I don't have the ten dollars to give him! "

"Well," said the man, "don't get sore about it. I only do like he told me."

And I said, "Well, I don't have one dollar-not one cent. I can't give it to you."

There I had all my husband's money in my underskirt pocket, but I told him I had

not one penny.

So then my husband came home at night and I asked him why he sent that man for ten dollars, instead to come himself.

He said, "Why Rosa, I didn't send nobody. I didn't go by Guido today. I didn't go."

"Oh, for the love of Mike! " I said. "That man came here and he said to give him the ten dollars. And he was a Toscano too." So then I told all about it.

Gionin said, "Well, God, He blessed you this time, Rosa, that you didn't give it! "

And nobody-nobody-knew where that man came from! I don't know yet who he was or how he could know about that other horse.

My husband when he was young was a beautiful man-nice teeth, nice hair, nice face, and big and strong. So all those ladies on Franklin Street, they liked him. And one woman, Dina, she loved him. And she all the time sent for him. But I don't think he did anything with her-he was just a very friend of her husband because they both sold bananas and would go together to buy them. I was brokenhearted, but I never said anything about it.

Well then one day a Toscana woman she came by me and said, "Oh Rosa, I saw your husband go in Dina's house and stay all night last night." [end page 207]

And sure, I knew he didn't come home till one o'clock. I was crying by myself and asking myself what I am going to do. So after that Toscana woman left me I said, "I know what I'm going to do to get happy again! "

I took my new baby in my arms-my Visella was just two or three weeks old that

time-and I walked way to State and Superior Street to the Holy Name Church. I don't know if it's there anymore, but there used to be a crucifix in the front hall of that church with Jesus about nine feet tall. It made you shiver to look at Him. I kneeled down saying all the prayers and crying for about one hour. And then I was looking up at the face. When you go here that face looks at you, and when you go there it looks. Where you are makes no difference those eyes look at you anyway.

So then I took my little baby in my arms and started home. And all at once I was happy-I didn't have that worry no more in my heart. And after I passed Franklin Street and came by the bridge on Indiana, I met Cesca, the wife of Tomaso the cousin of Gionin.

"Oh my goodness, Rosa! " she said. "Where did you go with that little baby? "

I said, "I just went on State Street."

"Oh, you went to the Boston Store?

"No, just on State Street."

She said, "Your eyes are so red. You've been crying?"

But me, I didn't tell. I didn't say nothing.

Then she said, "Oh, Rosa, didn't you kill your husband last night?"

"Why do you say that? " I asked her.

"Oh," she said, "those three cousins they make me so much trouble! They were playing cards in my house till one o'clock night and I couldn't chase them away. They learn to gamble with those cards like the American men, and I can't chase them away."

So then when my husband came home that night he was so sleepy. I said, "Sure you're sleepy. Why not when you come home one o'clock night? "

He said, "Yes, I went by Cesca's and I was playing cards."

So then I began weeping and I told him all that I had done.

He said, "Why Rosa, I have no intentions with those other [end page 208] women-they're jolly, that's all. Do you think I can put the beauty of you with that Dina and her rotten teeth?" And the tears were coming down from his eyes too. He said, "Rosa, I tell you, I'll never again walk in Dina's house! Never! "

And he surely never did. And he even stopped buying bananas with Dina's husband. Those other Toscani they were not religious. Only Gionin had the strong religion. And that husband of Dina was terrible. When he and Gionin took their wagons and went together to peddle bananas and they came near a church he would say, "Hey, Gionin, hurry up and move away from this bad-luck place! " He wouldn't go near the churches and he hated the priests. He'd say, "Those blackbirds in there make me sick. If they put God alive in my mouth I will spit Him out! I will chew God up and spit Him out! " That man was so bad I was glad when Gionin stopped peddling bananas with him. It was only because they were Toscani together that they were friends like that. They had only a little bunch of Toscani in Chicago. The other Italians around there came later and they were Sicilian.

The people from Toscana they're not good like the people from Lombardia. But they're not bad like the people from Sicilia- I should say not! The people from

Piemonte are a little more bad than the people from Lombardia, but they come next. Lombardia is the last in the world to do wrong things. The Italian government made that investigation and they said so. Gionin was not like the other Toscani in Chicago, but they were all paesani-they all stuck together and helped the other. [end page 209]

Chapter 24

Pretty soon after the World's Fair-that Fair of 1893-there came such a hard time. Oh, it was so poor a time! Some people had no room to sleep in, so the city was making a big wooden building to cover them up. Oh, that was a terrible, terrible poor time! There was no work; the men couldn't stay in Chicago. So Gionin he went away too. He pawned his watch and my wedding gold-all that we had he gave that pawn man to get ten dollars for the big boots and the ticket. Then he went to the sawmill in Wisconsin where they saw the trees, and he was taking care for the engine in the nighttime. But he had to go the whole month before he got the ten dollars' wage to send me. Me and my children were home there and starving.

One time I remember I had nothing to eat for three days in the house, and Domenico he came up so hungry. He said, "Mamma, Mis' Sibel downstairs, she's got a whole loaf of bread! I came past her door and I see it-she's got a whole loaf of bread on the table and one little piece too.

I said, "Well, I don't know. You want to ask her for some.

"No, Mamma," he said. "If I ask her maybe she don't give it. I'll just go in and take that little piece."

"No, no, Domenico," I said. "That's stealing-that's a sin." [end page 210]

That poor little boy he was crying and crying, and so hungry. Pretty soon he couldn't stand it anymore. He went down by that lady's door. He was there looking at the bread and waiting for Mis' Sibel to come back. That lady didn't come and didn't come, so Domenico he took that little chunk of bread and ate it up. When he saw Mis' Sibel coming up the stairs, he told her. That woman, she was the wife to the saloon man, she was rich-she had plenty to eat-she didn't care for the little chunk of old bread. When she saw how starving my little boy was she was sorry. Instead of licking him for stealing She took him in her house and gave him that whole loaf of bread to bring home.

In that time I was scrubbing the saloon-all the floors in the saloon downstairs for fifty cents. But I didn't get the fifty cents; the man he kept that for my rent. Then I had to move to the attic on the top floor We were right under the roof in the really attic, because I could no more pay those six dollars rent we paid on the third floor: I was doing the scrubbing and giving two dollars more. He gave me the attic for the scrubbing-four dollars a month rent. Oh, sometimes I was wishing I was back in Italia! But sometimes not too.

In that time the city hall was giving food to the people. The people were standing in line there on Clinton Street where the rope pulled up the streetcar. We used to get for one week a piece of salt pork and some dried peas and the loaf of bread and some coffee or some tea. Sometimes we stood there half the day and when it's our turn they had no more left to give. One day I was standing there early, early in the morning, so I would come in before the food was gone.

Us poor women were frozen to death; we didn't have the warm clothes, and there was such a storm with the snow and the wind! Eight o'clock, when the door opened, all the people were pushing to get in. There came the police with their clubs and they were yelling like we were animals. Then one of those police hit the woman next to me on the head with his club. I didn't see her, but I don't think she pushed. The people behind were pushing us, that's all. When I saw that, I said to myself, "Better I starve before I let that policeman hit me! "

And I ran home from that line. And I never, never went there again.

Another place the people were waiting in line was the police station. Every day they gave a little pail of soup and a piece of bread for each [end page 211] family. I used to send my Domenico and Visella. But Visella was so little she couldn't stand it-she chewed up half the bread before she came home. We used to get a little coal sometimes from the city-like two bags in one month. We were freezing up there under the roof. When we could find nothing else to burn, Domenico and Visella used to go and find the wood blocks that came loose in the road so we had something to burn in our stove. All the roads were made of those wood blocks in that time. My Domenico, he was six or seven years old, he used to go for five cents a week by one lady and carry the coal and the wood. Every day he carried two pails of coal-big pails-from the basement to the third floor, and he chopped the wood and carried that too. So every Saturday he got one nickel. Oh, how glad he was to come home with that nickel! He gave it to me and we bought the big soup bone and had good soup. You know in that time the meat was cheap-for five cents you got a big piece; but we didn't have the nickel to buy.

Now the women complain the meat is dear, but they've got the fifty cents to buy it.

Once in that poor time I was crying and praying. All the night I was praying. I said, "Oh God, if I can only have a crust of bread for these children! I have not one crumb in the house-not one thing! "

Early in the morning I went down the stairs to empty the dirty water in the basement. There in the snow I thought I saw something shine like money. I put down my pail and went there. I thought probably I mistake-it's a piece of tin-and there I was scared to pick it up. But sure enough, I took it in my hand and it was a quarter! Think of that miracle! I ran to the store without even a shawl on my head. For fifteen cents the lady gave me a whole bag of bread pieces, because they were stale, so I had ten cents for another day. I came home and I hollered, "Children, get up! Get up! I've got a big bag of bread!" Those children, they couldn't believe it-they had to see it for themselves. So then they all jumped up and we had that bread with some tea I had left from the city hall. Three children I had home that time: my Domenico, my Visella, and my Maria. And me, I was in family-way with my first Leo. I no longer had my Francesco. Just after I came in Chicago Mamma Lena sent word for Francesco to come back to Bugiarno, with some men who were going. She said she had arranged [end page 212] already to send Francesco to school to make him a priest. And when I knew she wanted to make him a priest I couldn't say no. But he didn't make a priest. After a few years the school said it's no use. Maybe he can be an artist or something else, but not a priest.

That quarter I found when I prayed God for some bread, it was really a miracle!

But you know, even when I was so poor, I never wanted to die. I used to suffer and didn't get discouraged because I thought it was supposed to be like that. I had such a strong religion-such a good faith. I thought God wanted it that way and when He wanted different it would be.

One day a beautiful lady came in my house-a beautiful dancer. She said she wanted somebody to wash her clothes and clean her house. She went by those American ladies in the house next door first-Mis' Nelson and Mis' Regan-and they told her about me. I said, "Well, lady, I can wash good, but I don't know to iron. I never did the ironing."

She said, "Oh yes, you can do it-they're all silk things." So I went there with her-far on the north side. We went on the streetcar, because it would take the whole day to walk.

She said, "Here." She gave me just a little bundle of washing-a bunch of handkerchiefs and the silk kimono and the underwear-and she said, "When you get through the washing, you can clean the house." She showed me those three rooms and what to do. Then she said, "When you finish you close the door and leave the house." She put there on the table meat and potatoes; then she gave me one dollar. When I saw those good things to eat and one dollar for such a 'little work I almost fainted! Then she went-she had to go back to her work in the theater.

So I continued for a long time to do that little work every week and made one dollar. Think how nice-how happy I was! But then one day she said she had to

leave-she had to go away with the company. She said, "Rosa, when I come back, the first thing I'm going to find you again."

I came home so sad and so sorry. I met that Mis' Nelson and the other lady and I had tears coming down from my eyes. But I told them that she was going to find me again when she came back. [end page 213]

So it went along and it was April, in that terrible poor year, and a lot of snow. Here came that Mis' Nelson in my house and she said, "Rosa, I got a letter from that dancing lady. She's in the same place and she wrote the letter to tell you to go right away back-today. She thought you wouldn't understand if she wrote to you. You go to that same place."

I had only one nickel in my house to make the supper for my family, but I was so glad. I took that nickel and went on the streetcar; then I had to walk a long piece too. My shoes were all broke open, with my feet cold and freezing, so I had the chill-wet and a chill. But anyway I was happy. I knocked on the door. Here came a lady I never saw before. I said, "Some ladies said I have the letter to come here and wash the clothes for Miss Miller."

She said, "Well, I don't know; I don't think she's coming back. She didn't come back yet. But you come in and get warm. I think I know what those women did to you. Those ladies, they fooled you. Today is the April Fool. But that's no way to do to a poor lady that can't understand! I don't think it's right for the American women to fool a poor lady that doesn't know how to talk English! "

She let me get warm and she gave me a cup of coffee. Then she went to her closet and found some shoes to put on me, and she gave me some stockings too. Me, I

wanted to cry-I had even no money to go home. That good lady, she gave me the carfare. But how did I know in America they make the April Fool? I didn't even know what it was. And there I lost that nickel I was saving to make some supper for my children.

Toni, he had no work in the mosaic and he couldn't find no work anywhere. So then he remembered that organ his old father used to carry on the street. He said, "I don't care for me, but those poor children! " He had many meals nothing to cat himself, but he couldn't stand it when he heard my children cry for hunger. So he took that organ on his back and he went the whole day-but far away where there were rich people. I remember he had three or four songs in that organ. He used to play "Rosie O'Grady," and "After the Ball Is Over," and one song it went like this: "Boy and girl together, me [end page 214] and Maimie Morain"-or O'Ryan or something that sounded like that. So he used to go around and pick up a few cents with that organ.

One night he came home after all day and he said, "Here, I made fifteen cents today! Take it and we'll make a polenta! "

We ran out and for three cents we got the bag of cornmeal; then we got some liver. The liver was cheap in that time-they were throwing it to the cats and dogs. (Not like now, huh? Now it's the style to eat liver.) So I cooked that cornmeal with the liver in it and made a nice polenta. My children, when they got that good supper-oh, I wish you had seen it! They thought it was the king's wedding!

He all the time helped us in that hard time, Toni. I guess if he didn't, me and

my children would be starved. He had no work, but he carried that hand-organ every day the whole day and picked up a few cents from the rich. What he had he gave to me to make the meal so everybody could eat. After the poor time, Toni got the good job again making the mosaic. Then my husband made his sister come from Italia, and Toni married her. But that sister was working in those places to sew the clothes-those dark places where they used to make the clothes-and she got the consumption and died. When their two children got the consumption too, Toni went insane. And he's there now, sitting in the insane house in Kankakee. He doesn't even remember that those two children died. I feel sorry for that good, kind Toni.

When Gionin came home from Wisconsin at the end of that winter he brought for three months the pay-thirty dollars he brought. You were like a millionaire if you had thirty dollars in that time! I got a nice clean cloth and wrapped that money, then I put it under the clothes in the bureau drawer. It was not yet two hours when here came in our house one of those cousins of his. That man said, "Gionin, I've got to have the money. I've got to have! Let me have some money-"

My husband said, "Well, I brought just thirty dollars and my wife she needs it. She has no clothes for the children-the children are naked. And it's almost the time for the new baby to be born."

"Give it to me," he said. "Gionin, let me have it and I'll give it back right away on Saturday night." [end page 215]

"You're sure you will give it back Saturday night?"

"Sure! Give it to me! I've got to have it'

So my husband came to me and said, Rosa, give me the thirty dollars back."

I said, "No! Why are you going to take it? I need it! I need it! Then I began to cry.

"Give it to me! " he said.

So there I had to give it to him and I had not one penny left in the house. All the night I was crying, because I lose that thirty dollars. Gionin he couldn't stand it to hear me cry like that. He got up from the bed about nine o'clock and he went. (In that time we were going to bed when it was dark-six o'clock, or what time it got dark. We didn't have no oil to burn and we had no place to go.)

In the morning when I went to the house of Mis' Mill to do the cleaning, she saw that I had been crying so much, and she asked me about it. When I told her, she said, "Well don't cry, Mis' Cavaneri." And she went and found some little stockings and clothes to put on my children.

Gionin, when he saw me crying like that, he went again and again in the night by his cousin and asked him, and begged him, for the thirty dollars back again. But all the time, every night, that cousin had some sad-luck story. After a few weeks my husband got tired and he didn't even ask anymore. He knew he wouldn't get it. And I don't have it yet! But God He helped us, and that cousin of my husband, he stayed a poor man. That's the punishment he got from God. But oh, I was brokenhearted when I had that thirty dollars and lost it.

I don't know if I should tell about that fire we had when we were living over the saloon-that man he's alive yet and he's more religious than anybody now. He all the time goes to the Italian church. Sometimes he looks to me like he wants

to say something-but I never speak to that man. He got so religious after his wife died. Well, that time in the poor year, he had a lot of wine in his saloon and it went bad and he wanted to get the insurance. So he chopped up some wood in the basement and made a fire. My husband woke up in the middle of the night and he heard that wood chopping, but he didn't wake up enough. [end page 216] The next thing he woke up and we were all ready to burn up-all smothered with smoke. That saloon man was outside hollering, "Fire! Get out!

There we had not even time to put a coat on. Some of that family from the second floor were on the stairs. The little girl was falling over in a faint-she said she couldn't go. And that big cat they had was already dead. Visella came down with two shoes in her hand, but that's all the clothes we saved. We came out in the snow with no clothes, and so cold. We had to run way down the next block, to our knees in snow, and barefoot, in the middle of the night. Tomaso, the cousin of my husband, he took us in and they made hot coffee with whiskey in, but I got sick from that cold anyway-and my baby not yet born.

When the insurance came to investigate they found out the saloon keeper had his family all moved one block away with all their things-with the clothes and the furniture and all what they had. When they saw he made the fire himself he got not one cent. Our things didn't burn, though; the firemen came and put out the fire before it could reach the attic. Only the windows broke, and they fixed them the next day so we could go back. I guess that man thought he could tell us in plenty of time after the first floor burned. But what did he think we're going to do in the attic if all the underneath burned first? Did he think we

could stay up in the air with nothing under?

The night my first Leo was born my husband came home with his first pay-seven dollars for one week. We thought we would jump to the moon when he found that good job in the candy factory with seven dollars' pay for one week! The midwife was gone already when he came home with that pay. He ran out and bought the butter and some bread and made that hot water with the bread and butter in, like us Italian women always drink when we have the baby just born.

Then that boss in the candy factory said, "Why do you want to pay the rent? You and your family can come here in these nice rooms behind the factory."

Gionin thought it was nice if we could leave that attic and have the rooms to live in without paying the rent, so he said yes.

But that man, he was not good. He came after me. He said it's [end page 217] such a poor time he's going to buy me the clothes and all the things I want.

Then he talked bad-he wanted me to be like a wife. When he came after me like that I got the scare. I told Gionin. Gionin said, "Well, we don't say anything-we will just go away. We're going to get out without the fighting."

So there my husband had that nice job in the hard times and he had to lose it.

He was good, no-to go away and lose that good job to save me from the boss?

Seven dollars a week in that time was something wonderful! He found three nice light rooms, but far away from those other Toscani. We moved to Union Street where there were all the German and Irish and Norwegian. And then Gionin had to go and go and try to find another job. He used to come home with his feet all blisters, trying to find a job. [end page 218]

Chapter 25

Those new rooms we had in the big house with the Norwegian families, oh, I used to love them. They were so light and big with the high, high ceilings; I just loved them. But then one day a high-educated man came there, Dr. Taylor, and he wanted to rent the whole building to make something. So the boss came and he told all the families that we had to move. He said we could stay one month with the free rent, but after that we must be out, because there was going to be some kind of big home there.

Everybody was telling a different story: some people said it was going to be a hospital; some said it was going to be a home for girls; some said it was going to be a home for the orphan children. Nobody knew what it was. The boss didn't know-nobody knew. But they said it was going to be something good for the people. Dr. Taylor, he told the boss that something good was coming. He said it was going to be a good home to teach the poor people good things. But whatever was coming, we had to get out anyway.

Me, I was so sorry to leave that house, and I didn't know where to go. I couldn't find no more good rooms, because nobody would rent to Italians. I was staying there till the one month was gone. Then I had to go someplace. I had to go in a basement about one block away [end page 219] next to a factory. That factory, I don't know what it was, but they were melting all the waste from the tin-the scraps of tin they brought there and melted. They had so much fire in that factory that when the wind was one way, all the hot cinders came down on the sidewalk and the children scalded their feet-those cinders all the time

burned the children's feet. I was so sorry that I had to live in that basement!

I used to take my children and go back and watch those carpenters working on our old home. I thought maybe we could get our old rooms back again. But even before the carpenters got through the work, the people started to move into that building. They were all high-up people, dressed up nice. Me, I was even mad with them that they made us poor people get out. I was crying-I had no more the nice light rooms to live in.

Then one night after a while it rained hard. My poor rooms had one foot of water in. The baby's cradle was swimming around, and that basket of clothes I used to wash, it was swimming around too. We were all the night up from the scare. My husband was throwing the water out with a shovel and sweeping it out with a broom. When morning came I went by our old house and I was standing by the door crying and angry. A nice lady, a nice young girl, came out and said, "Why are you here, lady? Why are you crying?"

I said, "It's you people-on account of you people I had to get out from this home! And now come and see where I live! Last night I was drowned with the water, me and my children! "

That young lady felt so sorry. She came along and saw my house. And still my husband was shoveling the water out. She said, "Oh, I'm very sorry! Very sorry! I'm going to go right away and look for a house for you."

And she did. She went and she found a house and paid the rent and sent the wagon. She had to pay the rent ahead of time, because it was such a poor time nobody had any money. Before six o'clock in the evening I was in the new home.

It was three nice little rooms in the front on the first floor of a wooden house. (They made the bridge there now for the railroad. They tore down those houses when they made the railroad.) So we were in that nice little house. And as soon as I could I collected all the little money I had and paid back the lady [end page 220] all the rent and the express she had to pay for me. Then I was nice and happy.

That lady-she wore a nice red blouse-she got a little work for me in the new settlement house. I started to wash the clothes for the residents and cleaned around the building and helped the cook-anything they told me. But when I first started that job-scrubbing the floors in the Commons-I was still so afraid of the teachers. And one day, I didn't see it, but a hole in my apron caught hold of one of those iron curls on a big lamp that was standing on the floor and that lamp fell over. I heard the crash and I looked around and when I saw that beautiful pink glass lamp shade in a million pieces on the floor I fell over in a faint. I thought I would be put in jail! I thought I would be killed! Miss May and one other teacher, they came running in to see what had happened. When they saw me there on the floor without my senses they woke me up and carried me into the kitchen and made me drink hot tea with sugar in it. "Rosa! Rosa!" they said. "Where are you hurt? Where did it hit you?" And when they learned that I had only fainted from scare because I had broken the pink glass lamp they started to laugh. "But Rosa," they said, "you did a good thing! That lamp was terrible! Somebody gave it to us, so we had to keep it. But now it's gone and we won't ever have to see it again. You did good! We're glad it's broken!"

Think of those angel women! They didn't scold me or anything. They were giving me hot tea with sugar in it and patting my shoulder and telling me they were glad. How can I not love America! In the old country I would have been killed for breaking a lamp like that!

So after that time of the pink glass lamp I said to myself, "Oh, I hope I do my work good so I never have to leave this place! I'm never going to leave!" And I truly never did. Forty or fifty years I've been scrubbing the floors, cleaning the rooms, doing the cooking, and telling the stories in the Commons. I grew old with that building. I love it like another home. I know every board in the floors, and I think those little boards know me too. Now I am old, I only have the little job to do the cooking when the regular cook is off. But even if they didn't pay me I would not want to stop working in the Commons. Never! [end page 221]

In that time us poor women, we didn't have any pleasures-no movies, no shows, no this, no that. And so many drunken men there were! Some men-those Toscani on Franklin Street and Gionin-on Sundays they used to play boccie. They'd throw the wood balls in the alley, and they'd play cheese too. They had that forma, the Italian cheese, and they'd throw that. They all went together to buy it, but the one that threw hardest, he won the cheese. But the alley was too dirty; when they had the cheese, they'd go far away where there was the clean road or some green grass.

Those swill boxes in the alley used to stay so packed full that the covers were all the time standing up. Oh my, oh mercy! It was stinking so the poor little

children were holding their noses when they ran back the alley to come home. Inside those boxes the wood was all rotten and juicy. One whole box of garbage was nothing but white worms. After the wagon passed to shovel the box out-they weren't careful how it was falling-all the alley was full of white worms. The children, they didn't like those worms! They used to pick up stones and tin cans to throw at them. They couldn't stand it when they squashed them with the bare feet. That garbage was terrible, terrible! I don't know why everybody in Chicago didn't die.

Rushing-the-can like the men, that's all the pleasure the poor women had in that time. In the summer when it was so hot you couldn't stay in those buildings, the women and the boys and girls and babies were sitting down in the street and alley. All the women would bring down their chairs and sit on the sidewalk. Then somebody would say, "All the women put two cents and we'll get the beer." So everybody did and the children would run by the saloon and get the can of beer. The saloon had ice and they kept that beer ice cold. So the women, and children too, were drinking beer to get cool. Nobody but the saloon had ice in that time. That's all the pleasure we had-the cool from the beer in summer. Even when we started the club in the settlement, the women in the alley were drinking beer.

After not long, one lady from the settlement house-she was American but she could talk German too-she asked me if I wanted to go round the neighborhood with her and ask all the women to come and start the woman's club. Those women didn't know what it was, [end page 222] but they wanted to come anyway. Oh, I remember there was one lady-everybody knew her-she was tall, tall, about six and a half

feet, with red hair. She was really a lamp post on the street. That woman, for one dime she would choke the Devil, so stingy she was for the money. And bad! Everybody was scared of that lady. She had the saloon and she was getting drunk herself, and she was swearing terrible and chasing the children. She fought with everybody. Mis' Reuter, she said to me, "We're going in the saloon and ask that lady."

"Sure not, Mis' Reuter!" I said. "If she comes in the club the other women won't-they'd be too scared."

But Mis' Reuter, I guess she went sometime when I didn't know it and asked that lady anyway, because one day here she was in the club. The other women were saying, "She's in our club? She's coming in our club? What are we going to do?" That lady, in two or three weeks, she changed from a devil to a lamb-honest to goodness! She got good. When it was her turn she was the first one to go and wash the dishes and make the coffee. And she was talking nice to the women to make them laugh, so they would like her. She got to be the best one of all. And when she moved to California the woman's club were so sorry they gave her a big well-fare party. And some were even crying. (What was that lady? I guess she was Irish or German. I remember her name, but I won't tell it. I'll leave it to the people to find out if they want to know who she was.)

In the first beginning we always came in the club and made two circles in the room. One circle was for those ladies who could talk English and the other circle was for the ladies who talked German. Mis' Reuter talked German to the German ladies, and Miss Gray talked English to the other ladies. But I guess

they both did the same preaching. They used to tell us that it's not nice to drink the beer, and we must not let the baby do this, and this. Me, I was the only Italian woman-where were they going to put me? I couldn't talk German, so I went in the English circle. So after we had about an hour, or an hour and a half of the preaching, they would pull up the circle and we'd play the games together. All together we played the games-the Norwegian, the German, the English, and me. Then we'd have some cake and coffee and the goodnight song.

[end page 223]

One nice lady, Miss Chase, she used to teach the girls and the women to sew. Some young girls were ready to get married and they had never held a needle before. And Miss Chase, she'd teach them to make their own wedding dress. She was teaching me to sew too. She was a wonderful lady, Miss Chase, but she died after one year.

Oh, I have to tell you about the two gray hoods I made my Maria and my Visella from somebody's thrown-away underskirt. I found that old petticoat in the trash, all holes and torn, but it was wool and warm. All the other children in the sisters' school were Irish. They used to laugh at my two little girls and call them "spaghetti." When those other children laughed at those hoods, Visella used to carry hers by the string behind her. Gionin, he couldn't stand it to see those little girls crying because they had to wear those funny hoods, summer and winter-they had nothing else. So one day-he said nothing to me so I wouldn't stop him-he walked downtown to the Boston Store and he came home with two little red-and-black knit caps. He said he got them very cheap. Those little girls were

just crazy with joy to have the really caps! I had stitched up those two hoods any which way so the cloth stayed on their heads. But after Miss Chase started teaching me, I made nice little dresses-well not so nice with all old cloth, but they were not so funny anyway.

Pretty soon they started the classes to teach us poor people to talk and write in English. The talk of the people in the settlement house was different entirely than what I used to hear. I used to love those American people, and I was listening and listening how they talked. That's how I learned to talk such good English. Oh, I was glad when I learned enough English to go by the priest in the Irish church and confess myself and make the priest understand what was the sin! But I never learned to do the writing in English. I all the time used to come to that class so tired and so sleepy after scrubbing and washing the whole day-I went to sleep when they started the writing. I couldn't learn it.

They had the clubs for the children too; my little girls loved to go. And after a few years when they started the kindergarten, my Luie was one of the first children to go in.

That big and old building where Chicago Commons was in the [end page 224] beginning was all full of rats-three pounds, five pounds, I don't know how many pounds to make those rats, but they were big! The residents used to wait in line by the bathroom door, and when somebody didn't come out and didn't come out, they'd push open the door, and there it was the rats playing tag with themselves. And when the residents were all sitting down eating dinner, those rats chased between their legs. And sometimes in the morning the dining-room

girls came down and found big holes in the tablecloth. Those rats ate up all the places where the grease spilled! So Dr. Taylor begged the money to build a new building. He made it about six blocks away on the corner of Grand Avenue and Morgan Street. And me, I was the one to go in that new building and light the first match in the stove. I cleaned the kitchen the first one in the new Chicago Commons! In those first years the settlement house didn't have enough money to tell me to come every day. They were poor in that time. The residents-men and girls both-were going in the kitchen and washing the dishes themselves. Each one had something else for a paying job. They did the janitor work and everything like that free. Just once a week I was going there to do the heavy scrubbing and the washing.

Well then Dr. Taylor asked me if I wanted to go there in the old building and watch all the plumbing. The bathtub and all those plumbing things belonged to Chicago Commons and he was afraid somebody would steal them, so he wanted one family to live in there and watch. I said, "Well, I have to ask my husband."

He said, "You have to answer quick, because I want someone to be in that building."

So I told my husband and he was glad. He said, "Sure, we're going to go and pay no rent. It's good to pay no rent for a few months."

I said, "But I'm afraid. I don't feel like going."

He said, "Oh why do you want to be afraid? There's nothing to be afraid of. You go tell Dr. Taylor we're going to move in there."

Me, I was brokenhearted because I didn't feel like going. I ran by the Madonna

Addolorata in the Irish church and I prayed. I said, "O Madonna, I feel so unhappy to go in that house! You put it in my mind if I should go or not go." Then I said a prayer. When I got up I felt in my heart, "No, don't go! [end page 225]

So I went right away back to Dr. Taylor and I said, "No, Dr. Taylor. We don't go, because I'm afraid in a big house like that."

He said, "All right. When you're afraid, don't go."

When I came home and told my husband he was mad! He said, "Why did you tell him that? We want to go! Why not? Why you are afraid? We're going to go! "

I said, "No. You can go yourself, but I won't go there!

Dr. Taylor put boards up to all the windows and he left that old house there alone in the middle of the lumber yard. And then it came one day after a week or two (I don't remember just how long, but just a short time) and an old man came by in a wagon. And nobody knew why that old man said what he did. He said, "I'll not give five cents for all the houses on this street! " (I guess he saw a little fire that started in the lumber yard, or something.) Just after he passed there exploded a great big fire. And there the old Chicago Commons went up in the air! If I had been there with my children we could not say "Jesus-Mary-Joseph," we'd have been killed so quick! The wind picked up that fire and it spread all down the street. All the lumber from the lumber yard, the wind picked it up in big chunks and it came down on our roofs all blazing-all fire. Those banana wagons full of hay in our alley, they caught on fire. My husband had his bananas in the basement, so they didn't burn, but all the swill

boxes caught fire and the boards on the sidewalk. Everybody was carrying water and wetting the roof.

One lady, the boss of our house, she raised up her two hands and she hollered, "Oh, Sant' Antoni, help us! Help us! " She saw that fire coming. It was terrible. And just when she hollered like that the wind changed and went the other way! Sant' Antoni is the protector of fire. You can ask anybody that was in the Commons then and they will tell you too: that wind just changed around. Maybe it was not Sant' Antoni; but why did it change like that? The wind it turned around and it burned four blocks the other way. But all the houses by us caught on fire anyway.

My husband wasn't there when the fire exploded; he was downtown to send the ticket for his brother in Italia to come to America. But he heard down there that there was a terrible fire, and he right [end page 226] away came home. He had his wagon with the horse on and grabbed up some clothes and some quilts and trash from the bed. Then he took us and went out to the end of Indiana Street-a little further than Western Avenue. It was all prairie there then-all country.

So me and the children were in that prairie, and my husband went back to look after the house. Our house, the carpenter had just made the new roof on, and it didn't catch fire. It had all that resina still in.

Me, I had a five-dollar gold piece I had saved. I had hidden it and I didn't tell my husband. And there I forgot it and left it in that house! Gionin came back ten o'clock night. He said, "Our house is saved. We can go back."

I said, "Oh, then I have my gold piece safe!"

He said, "You have the gold piece? You hid it from your husband, huh? See, that's what you get!" But he was glad too. He was a good man, Mr. Cavalleri. He was good to me. He didn't do nothing. Me, I didn't care for the house or nothing-I was only thinking of my gold piece!

We went back so happy and started eating the soup that was on the stove. There we had run away and left all the doors open and the soup on the stove. (I had the gasoline stove that time, I remember.) But I had the faith our house wouldn't burn, because I had prayed Sant' Antoni too.

I don't have to say it. You can guess yourself that the Madonna made a great miracle to save me and my children from the dead! My husband, probably he wouldn't have died because he was downtown sending the money to his brother; but me and my children died for sure if we'd been in that old Chicago Commons. It was some big boiler in the meat market next door that exploded.

That night the old settlement house burned those ladies from the new building didn't eat their supper-nothing-they were all watching. And after the fire they came over and picked up some little pieces of burnt wood. They said, "Sure, I recognize! It's a piece of my bedroom-it's a piece of the decoration!" They were so sad-they saved even those little pieces to remember. [end page 227]

Chapter 26

The year my Leo was born I was home alone and struggled along with my children. My husband went away because he was sick-he went by a doctor in St. Louis to get cured. That doctor said he must stay away from his home one year and gave him a job to do all the janitor work around his house for five dollars a month and his

board. So me, I used to go all around to find the clothes to wash and the scrubbing. The city hall was helping me again in that time-they gave me a little coal and sometimes the basket of food. Bob, the sign painter downstairs, he helped me the most. He was such a good young man. He used to bring up a big chunk of coal and chop it up right in my kitchen and fix the stove.

I was to the end of my nine months, but the baby never came. So I went by one woman, Mis' Thomas, and I got part of the clothes washed. Then I said, "Oh, Mis' Thomas, I've got to go. I've got the terrible pains! "

She said, "You can go when you finish. You've got to finish first."

"No, I go. Otherwise I'll have to stay in your bed." When I said that she got scared I would have the baby there, so she let me go.

I went by the midwife, Mis' Marino, and told her to come; then I went home. When I saw it was my time, I told Domenico something [end page 228] and sent him with all the children to the wife of Tomaso. I told those people before, when they see the children come they must keep them all night-it's my time. It was really, really my time, and I had such a scare that I would be alone a second time. So when I heard a lady come in the building-she lived downstairs-I called to her.

She said, "I have no time." And she didn't come up.

I was on my bed all alone by myself and then I prayed Sant' Antoni with all my heart. I don't know why I prayed Sant' Antoni-the Madonna put it in my mind. And then, just when the baby was born, I saw Sant' Antoni right there! He appeared in the room by me! I don't think it was really Sant' Antoni there, but in my imagination I saw him-all light like the sun. I saw Sant' Antoni there by my

bed, and right then the door opened and the midwife came in to take care of the baby! It was February seventh and six below zero. There I had him born all alone, but Mis' Marino came when I prayed Sant' Antoni. She washed the baby and put him by me, but then she ran away. She didn't light the fire or nothing.

Oh, that night it was so cold! And me in my little wooden house in the alley with the walls all frosting-thick white frosting. I was crying and praying, "How am I going to live?" I said. "Oh, Sant' Antoni, I'll never live till tomorrow morning! I'll never live till the morning! "

And just as I prayed my door opened and a lady came in. She had a black shawl twice round her neck and head and that shawl came down to her nose. All I could see was half the nose and the mouth. She came in and lighted both the stoves. Then she came and looked at me, but I couldn't see her face. I said, "God bless you!"

She just nodded her head up and down and all the time she said not one word, only "Sh, sh."

Then she went down in the basement herself, nobody telling her nothing, and she got the coal and fixed the fire. Pretty soon she found that little package of camomile tea I had there on the dresser and she made a little tea with the hot water. And that woman stayed by me almost till daylight. But all the time she put her finger to her mouth to tell me to keep still when I tried to thank her.

And I never knew where that lady came from! I don't know yet! Maybe she was the [end page 229] spirit of that kind girl, Annina, in Canaletto? I don't know. I really don't know! I was so sick and I didn't hear her voice or see her face.

All the time she put her finger on her mouth and said, "Sh, sh." And when the daylight came she was gone.

About seven o'clock morning my children came home. And Mis' Marino, that midwife, she came at eight o'clock and said, "It's so cold I thought I'd find you dead!"

Then here came the city hall, or somebody, with a wagon. They wanted to take me and my new baby to the hospital. But how could I leave all my children? I started to cry-I didn't want to go. And my children cried too-they didn't want me to leave them. So then they didn't make me. They pulled my bed away from the frosting on the wall and put it in the front room by the stove. And my baby, I had him wrapped up in a pad I made from the underskirt like we do in Italia. But that baby froze when he was born; he couldn't cry like other babies-he was crying weak, weak.

My Visella was bringing up the wood and the coal and trying to make that room warm. But she was only a little girl, she didn't know, and she filled that stove so full that all the pipes on the ceiling caught fire. I had to jump up from the bed and throw the pails of water so the house wouldn't burn down. Then God sent me help again. He sent that Miss Mildred from the settlement house. She didn't know about me and my Leo born; she was looking for some other lady and she came to my door and saw me. She said, "Oh, I have the wrong place."

I said, "No, lady, you find the right place."

So she came in and found out all. Then she ran away and brought back all those little things the babies in America have. She felt sorry to see my baby banded

up like I had him. She didn't know then, Miss Mildred, that the women in Italia always band their babies that way. And she brought me something to eat too-for me and for my children. That night another young lady from the Commons, Miss May, she came and slept in my house to take care of the fire. She was afraid for the children-maybe they would burn themselves and the house. Oh, that Miss Mildred and Miss May, they were angels to come and help me like that! Four nights Miss May stayed there and kept the fire going. They were high-up educated girls-they were used to sleeping in the [end page 230] warm house with the plumbing-and there they came and slept in my wooden house in the alley, and for a toilet they had to go down to that shed under the sidewalk. They were really, really friends! That time I had my Leo nobody knew I was going to have the baby-I looked kind of fat, that's all. Those women in the settlement house were so surprised. They said, "Why you didn't tell us before, Mis' Cavalleri, so we can help you?"

You know that Mis' Thomas-I was washing her clothes when the baby started to come-she wanted a boy and she got a baby girl right after my baby was born. When I went there the next week to do the washing I had to carry my baby with me. When she saw him she said, "Well better I have a girl than I have a boy that looks like your baby! He looks for sure like a monkey!"

In the first beginning he did look like a monkey, but in a few weeks he got pretty. He got so pretty all the people from the settlement house came to see him. After two or three months there was no baby in Chicago prettier than that baby.

When the year was over for him, my husband came home from St. Louis. He didn't send me the money when he was there-just two times the five dollars-so he brought twenty-five dollars when he came back. Oh, he was so happy when he saw that baby with exactly, exactly his face and everything-the same dark gold hair and everything-and so beautiful. But he saw that baby was so thin and pale and couldn't cry like the other babies. "Better I go by a good doctor and see," he said. "I've got twenty-five dollars-I'm going to get a good doctor." So he did.

But the doctor said, "That baby can't live. He was touched in the lungs with the cold. Both lungs got froze when he was born."

And sure enough he was all the time sick and when it was nine months he died. My first Leo and my second Leo I lose them both. Oh, I was brokenhearted to lose such a beautiful baby!

I have to tell about another good thing the settlement house did for me. That winter my Leo died we were still living in that little wooden house in the alley. All my walls were thick with frosting from the cold, and I got the bronchitis on the lungs, with blood coming [end page 231] up. So one of those good ladies from the Commons, she arranged and sent me to a kind of home in the country where people go to get well. They had the nice nurses in that place and they cured me up good. I had a good time there too-I was all the time telling stories to entertain the other sick ladies.

In those two weeks I was gone, Chicago Commons helped my husband take care of the children, and my family moved into a good building. That building in front of where we were living had the empty rooms good and dry. But when my husband

asked the manager, he said, "No, I don't let no Italians in!"

So Dr. Taylor, he went himself downtown, or someplace, and saw the owner to that building. The owner said yes, the manager has to let my husband in. The rent was no more, and there we were in a nice dry building. I was no more sick after then. We were the only-or almost the only -Italian family in the neighborhood that time, and the Germans and Norwegians were afraid to let us come in their buildings. But Chicago Commons took care of us. In that time all the streets by the Commons were the Norwegians and the Lutherans. And on the next street were all the Irish. But then the Italians came and the Norwegians moved away. Most of those Italians, they were not Italians-they were Sicilians. Oh, the Irish and the Sicilians they didn't get along together! They were all the time fighting.

The Sicilian downstairs put out the tomato sauce to bake in the sun-all the yard covered up with those boards for the tomato sauce-and the Irish upstairs she hung up her clothes above with the paper between so the cord don't dirty the clean white shirtwaist. When she took off the clothespins, the paper, and sometimes the pillow case, went in the sauce. Then they both got mad and started the fighting. [end page 232]

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 Bugiarno. 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 Bugiarno. And the American people can't laugh like the people of Bugiarno. 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 dont 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]

Chapter 28

Tonight the Madonna made a miracle to help me. Listen what happened.

You know Mis' Bliss, the new housekeeper, she all the time comes in the kitchen, and such a fussing she makes. She's a kind lady, she never scolds nobody, but she wants everything made with such fussing that she makes me really dizzy. For thirty years I've done the cooking when the cook's away, and she thinks I don't know how? She has to help me? Well she came in the kitchen tonight and she was fixing the leaf on the salads, and fixing the dish for the potato with the parsley, and decorating this, and decorating this. I got so nervous I forgot all about those tomatoes on the stove. When I smelled them they were all caught black on the bottom. I didn't know what to do! All those tomatoes-lots, because we had forty people tonight. Oh, I was brokenhearted. I put that kettle in some cold water, and I was tasting, then Mis' Bliss was tasting. Those tomatoes tasted terrible burnt. Mis'Bliss said, "Well, it's too bad, but we can't help it. We'll open the can of peas, that's all."

I was almost crying-what a sin to waste all that good food. And I started praying the Madonna. I prayed with all my heart, what I can do to make those tomatoes come good again. All at once it came [end page 241] in my mind to go in the pantry and get some of that black spice--clover, cloves? I put some of that clove spice in a clean kettle with that tomato, and some sugar too. Then I cooked it up a little and I tasted. I could no more taste the burn--it even tasted good. I said, "Oh, Mis' Bliss, taste now! Just taste!"

She tasted and she said, "Well I don't know, but I don't think I taste the burn.

Then she tasted again and she said, "It's good, It's all right after all."

Just think how I was thanking the Madonna that she put in my mind about that clove spice! I never in my life heard to put that stuff in tomatoes. But when I told Mis' Bliss the Madonna made that miracle, she looked at me funny, like she thought I imagined. But that was true! The Madonna is the mother of us poor women. She helps us all the time. In the old time there were more miracles than now, but I see lots of miracles-in Chicago too. The Madonna and the Saints, they all the time make miracles to help me out. I all my life keep the good faith and the strong religion, that's why.

One time I saw a great miracle the Madonna did. She didn't make the miracle for me, but I say it anyway. Oh, I told the whole world that story--I told everybody. The residents in the Commons, and the residents in Hull House, and the residents in a lot of those other settlement houses in Chicago, and all the women in the Mothers' Clubs know that story.

One society of Sicilians they were making the festa with the stands to sell the pop and snails and they had those gamble things and the big fireworks and all like they do. Then Sunday afternoon they took the Madonna from the Church of the Addolorata and made the procession all through the streets. It was that Madonna with the Baby in her arms.

Well, that Sunday afternoon I came to the Commons to make the supper for the residents like I always do. And one of those nice new residents came in the kitchen after and dried the dishes for me. So I got done early and I came out to

go home. Right there by the corner of the Commons the procession was stopped and the men from the society were all running around to gather up the paper money to pin on the ribbons of the Madonna. That Madonna was beautiful and [end page 242] so big it took eight men to carry the platform. So the procession was standing there and here came the streetcar on the street in front. I saw it that the motorman had the intentions to go past--he didn't even slow down--so I said it's no use to run, I've got to wait for the next car. That motorman went half past the corner, then bang! He stopped that car so quick he made the people fall over themselves, His face was white like the ghost, and his eyes so big. He held up his hands together toward the Madonna. Then he was blessing himself, and he kept on fast making the cross and all the time looking to the Madonna. I looked to see what he was seeing. And there I saw the Madonna all light and more beautiful than she was. Beautiful! And her eyes were looking at that motorman.

I said, "I'm going to take that car! I'm going to talk to that motorman!"

I ran across the street and climbed on the car. When I came on the front, there that motorman was standing with his arms hanging down still looking in the face of the Madonna. When I asked him about it, he said, "Did you see it too! Did you see!"

I said, "Well, I don't know if I saw what you saw, but I saw the Madonna all beautiful and shining, and I think she looked at you."

"Oh, me lady, me lady," he said. (Sure he was the Irish--he all the time kept on saying "me lady.") "You saw it? Oh, but you didn't see it like I saw it! She made me stop the car! She turned her head and commanded me! But those eyes--I

can never forget!"

The officers from the society had to come and make that motorman go, or I guess he wouldn't go yet.

The feste and the processions in the old country, in Lombardy, oh, I used to love them. In Bugiarno everybody was reverent to the Madonna and the saints, even us little children. Our mothers hung out from the windows all what they had beautiful--the red shawl, the yellow silk bed quilt, the best sheet with the lace on--all what they had--to decorate the street. Then a lot of men came from Milano and put up the stands in the piazza and sold everything like a carnival. They had some gambling things too like in this country, and show people came and walked the tightrope. Everybody had a grand time. [end page 243] But when the carried the Madonna out from the church, all was quiet--everybody was reverent. But the feste the Italian people make here in Chicago, me, I think with Father Alberto, it's not right. It's not right to take the Holy Madonna out in the streets of Chicago where so many people have not our religion. The American men smoke and chew and keep on the hat when the Holy Virgin goes by. That's not right! Father Alberto doesn't like it that they take the saints and the Madonna on the streets of Chicago. But never again will they take the crucifix. Never since that terrible punishment God sent the boss of the Sicilian society.

Everybody was telling about that a year after. He's that big, black man with the pop-out eyes. He was living in the rooms behind when I was living in the front of that red building across from the Commons. Joe, they called him.

Joe, he was the president of one of those Sicilian societies. He was the whole

thing, like a boss. And that man liked to make a big show. He wanted to make a grand festa on the streets. So the society had made a big, big crucifix, painted up beautiful-all red blood coming down the face, and the cross to look like gold, and everything beautiful. Those men took the crucifix by our priest in the Italian church and the priest blessed it. Then they made the procession. Oh, the streets were decorated wonderful-they looked like heaven, with all different colored electric lights. And there were the stands to sell the snails, to sell the pop, to sell the pieces of watermelon, and all kinds of gamble things. And the fireworks, I don't know how much those fireworks cost! You could hear them five miles away. The streets were chuckful, packed-down with people when they carried the crucifix. Twelve men it took to carry the platform, and three men did nothing else but pin the money on the ribbons. So much money! (But I guess the society spent all on the festa, anyway.)

So when they were through they had no place to put the big crucifix, and they asked Father Alberto if he wanted to take it in the church. Our priest said he would take it but they must not come back to take it on the streets again. So all right, all right. And Father Alberto put it up over the altar in front. But then Joe decided he'd like to make another festa. He went by the priest and said he was taking out the crucifix. Father Alberto said it was not right, but Joe wanted it [end page 244] anyway. "You take it out, you keep it," said the priest. "You can't bring it back here."

So they made another big feast, and when it was over Father Alberto said no-what he had said, he had said, that's all. So then they went by the priest in the

Irish church. The Irish priest said he'd take the crucifix if they wouldn't come back and take it out again. So all right, all right. But next year, just the same, Joe came back and said he was taking the crucifix. The priest said, "You take it, you don't bring it back here. It's not right."

So after the procession those men didn't know what to do. The Italian church wouldn't take it, and the Irish wouldn't take it. Joe said, "We'll keep it ourselves, that's all." So they made a shed, like a big cupboard, beside one building in the alley. But a terrible storm came and knocked the shed down.

Joe said, "Now what'll we do? I'll take it in my own house."

Me, I saw with my own eyes when they brought that crucifix up the stairs and were trying to carry it into the little room in front. I even got the shock, Jesus looked so big! And here, even before they had it stood up, there came such a scream-the whole street below was one scream! And there they brought up the little boy of Joe-the only son he had-cut in pieces by the automobile. They laid that little boy dead on the table in front of his father.

Joe, his face went white like the blotting paper, but he shut his mouth tight.

He didn't swear one word. He just grabbed up the cover from the bed and threw it over the crucifix. He knew that he deserved that punishment. But think what a terrible punishment-his only son!

So then Joe went by Father Alberto. Father Alberto saw he was converted and had suffered enough, so he took that crucifix in the Italian church and put it way up next to the ceiling where no one can get it down. (But it burnt up with the church now.) And Joe never again made the festa. And nobody, nobody can take the

crucifix on the streets of Chicago.

Sometimes God punishes me too. He punished me when I did the fortune-telling in the teacup. I learned it from one lady that was working at the Commons, and I knew I could tell better than her, so I [end page 245] used to do it to make the entertainment. I just told the people to make fun. I said they're going to have luck, and I see a letter, and a little animal-maybe a cat-and this, and this.

But pretty soon I saw it, some of those ladies kind of believed me. Even one of the residents used to wrap up her cup and bring it to me. So one time I was trying to think what I could tell the priest in the confession and it came in my mind that maybe the fortune-telling is a sin. When I told the priest I made the fortune-telling in the teacup, but just for fun, oh, he almost licked me! I can no more tell all he said. "Just for fun! For fun you put the thorns on Jesus' head! For fun you make him die! For fun!"

"But no, Father! I don't say nothing bad-nothing strong. A letter, a little money, a party. Why's that a sin? "

He said, "No, you must not do it! You have to stop!

After a while Tillie, that Irish lady in the dining room, she came with her teacup again and teased and teased. She teased so much I told her just some little thing to keep her still. Then I told her she mustn't believe, because if she believed, it was a sin.

When I told the little new priest in confession, oh my, oh mercy! He said, "You're a woman and I think you have more sense than that! You make a mortal sin! That's a mortal sin! You're half in hell already!"

"Oh Father, don't say that! I didn't know it was a mortal sin! I didn't know."
"Yes," he said, "and you've got to swear to God at the altar that you never again will do the fortune-telling. You've got to swear." He gave me the absolution, but he made me swear to God by the altar that I never again would tell the fortune in the teacup.
When Tillie came with her teacup, I said, "Never again. I'm sorry, but I can't. I had to swear to God." She's not Catholic, Tillie. She's a funny religion I don't know, but I wish you could hear how she cursed the priest that he won't let me tell her fortune.
So then one day I looked in my own cup. I saw there some railroad tracks and a big fat woman. I said, "That looks like me fallen down. That's really me."
And sure enough that night when I started home from my work, I stepped down too quick from the sidewalk and one foot twisted [end page 246] over. I fell down in the street and I got the sprained ankle. I can't get up to go on the streetcar.
A little boy came by with his wagon and he let me ride on that cart. He took me home, and there I had to stay two weeks. For two weeks I can't go to my work! You see it? That's the punishment I got from God. After I swore to Him by the altar, He wouldn't even let me tell the fortune to myself.
Another time I had such a terrible year-a most unlucky time. For many, many years all us poor women in the Mothers' Club in the Commons, we make the Christmas play. Twenty years I had been Saint Joseph in the Christmas play. Most times we went up on the stage and just acted those parts and some high-educated lady read the story from behind the curtain. But one year we had the talking

play. So they wanted a king to talk in Italian and they gave that part to me. I like to do the talking on the stage and Saint Joseph didn't have any talking. They gave that part of Saint Joseph to Mis' Stefano. But that year I stopped being Saint Joseph and was a king, that was a most, most unlucky year! My Maria died, my Luie had the operation, and my husband was sick with the gallstones. I said, "Never again win I stop being Saint Joseph! " And I sure never did. Some of those new teachers that come to the Commons just to teach the Christmas play they get cross with me-they want to give somebody else that part-but I don't let them. I say, "No! Twenty years I've been Saint Joseph, you don't give it to somebody else now! " To heck with those new teachers! If God wants me to be Saint Joseph, I'm going to be, that's all. I don't want another unlucky year like that time. Never again. [end page 247]

Chapter 29

After my husband died, Luie and Visella they said, "Ma, you don't have to go to work anymore. You're an old woman now and so fat to go up and down the stairs and do that heavy cleaning. Stop the work in the Commons."

"No," I said. "Chicago Commons is my home-thirty years working there. I grew up with that place. I love it! I can't stop now." So I was back doing my cleaning.

But pretty soon I got the bad leg, and then I had that other sickness-the time I was supposed to die and didn't. After then I could no more go up and down all those stairs and scrub and lift. The housekeeper said she had to have a younger woman. But I didn't stop entirely-I kept a little job to go two times a week for the cooking when Tillie has her time off. And I never miss the Woman's Club, and

a lot of times when they have no program, I tell them the stories. That's why I
like so much to go to the moving picture-I learn a new story. The stronger they
make it, the better I like it. I never cry. Sometimes I laugh, though.

Oh, I never forget that time poor Ollie from the Commons was sitting down next
to me in the picture show. "You dirty brute! she hollered, and she was going
right after the stage-she wanted to kill the man in the picture. She was crying.

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Me, I grabbed hold of her and I said, "Sit down, Ollie, sit down and keep still!
The people will think we are drunk women! It's not a real man-it's a story!" And
I had to hold her down. Oh, I miss poor Ollie so much!

One day the housekeeper invited me and Ollie to go downtown and have supper-she
wanted to give us a nice, nice treat. She said we must meet her downtown at four
o'clock on one certain corner by Marshall Field's. It was Thursday, so I had my
day home, but I did all my washing and cleaning. Ollie, she worked all day
scrubbing at the Commons. So I met Ollie and we went. We were kind of scared
because we never went downtown alone; but we found the place she told us, and we
waited. Ollie said, "Oh, I'm so tired!" She had such sore feet, with the bunion
and the corn. She was even crying that she had to stand on them. And then those
old shoes she got from somebody, they didn't fit either. Oh, her feet hurt her
so much.

Then here came Mis' Bliss, looking like the queen-like the president-with white
gloves, with flowers in her hat, and hair all in curls. We two poor women, we
had on our best dresses, but we looked so poor and we were so tired from

working. Mis' Bliss said, "I tell you what we do: we're going to walk all down State Street and look at all the store windows."

Poor Ollie, so tired with her sore feet aching, she looked to me, and I looked to her. But we didn't say nothing. Oh lordy, lordy! Mis' Bliss, she made us do all that walking on State Street. Me, I felt like crying. I didn't care for no dinner-nothing. She walked till she was tired herself ; just think of us! Five o'clock we came back and she took us in the Chinese place. Oh, it was a beautiful place. But everybody was looking at her like a queen and us two poor women. (Ollie was dressed so poor!)

Mis' Bliss ordered chicken chop suey and all the grandest things. There was a row of silver by our place this big, but me, I was using just one fork so those poor servants wouldn't have to wash so many dishes. But when Mis' Bliss saw me-she was talking to us like we were babies-she said we must use this, and do this, and so, and so. Then she said, "Now you eat good and enjoy everything." There was a special man in back of her chair dressed up like a [end page 249] soldier, with blue suit and lines. He stayed right there and when he saw the water go down, he called another man to fill up the glass. "Oh, goodness," I said. "What for is that man? "

"He has that job to watch over us," she said. But how are we going to eat with that soldier watching how we do? Oh, lordy, lordy! It was funny, no? And Mis' Bliss, she was so happy with herself-she thought she was giving us such a good time. I was looking what she paid. She gave the man I guess it was a ten-dollar bill, and she got very little back.

Ollie and me, we were very, very friends together. She used to tell me all her troubles, and I told her mine. She used to go downtown and scrub the office building in the night. When she first came to do the scrubbing and cleaning in Chicago Commons she was so dirty dressed-up. She didn't even wash her face and neck or comb her hair, and she had the dirty sweater all pinned up with the safety pins. But she was the best one to do the scrubbing and the cleaning. And little and little, as she came to the Commons, she got clean. That poor woman, oh, she was happy when the teacher told her to come in the Woman's Club. She really washed herself and came to the club clean. She got the clean face and neck, and her hair combed neat. She had the nice yellow hair, and white, white skin. After she was to the Commons five, six months, she was a new woman entirely. And she was not so stupid, either; she was coming to the class in the night to learn the reading and writing. I remember now the big bunch of roses Ollie bought, when the Woman's Club made that nice party for Dr. Taylor's birthday. Ollie paid seven dollars for those roses! Her family couldn't eat for one week. But oh, she was happy she could give Dr. Taylor those roses!

One time when we were making the Christmas play in the Woman's Club, Ollie was supposed to say "infant," but she couldn't learn it. One high lady who came to the Commons to teach us the parts, she told her, and told her. But Ollie couldn't say "infant Jesus." She all the time said, "Infrant Jesus." So one afternoon when her scrubbing was done, she came where I was working, and she said, "What am I going to do, Rosa? I can't say it! What am I going to say?"

I said, "Well, Ollie, you say 'infrant.' You only must say 'infrant' [end page

250] when you die and go in the other world. Porta infrant is a Latin word the priest says when you close the door here and open to the next world. You've got to say 'infant.' 'Infant' means a baby." And I was making her say it after me, "Infant. Infant. Infant Jesus."

So then when the night came and we went up on the stage, I was listening to Ollie. Sure enough she said, "Infrant Jesus." In one month Ollie was dead. Something there was that made her say that word!

Ollie, her mother died when she was a little girl. When she was thirteen years old, her aunt made her marry an old man sixty years old. He was all the time drunk, and he beat her terrible. Such a life she had, that poor woman, with all those children and not one was right! Her husband, he was too old to work and he was awful mean. The Commons told Ollie better she leave that man. But she said, "No, he's my husband anyway." And she was not Italian; she was American-born in Chicago.

Ollie, she had the bad kidney sickness, and when she went to the clinic, the doctor pulled out her teeth. That day she came back from the dentist she looked white like the ghost. I was looking and looking. She looked like a saint! I was even jealous of her how beautiful she looked that night. Like an angel! I said, "Ollie, you're too sick. You sit down and I'll wash the floor for you. "

But then, after dinner, the housekeeper said, "Ollie, you've got to wash the dishes tonight-I planned on you. I've got nobody else. A couple of teeth is nothing-you'll be all right."

So Ollie tried to do it, but she couldn't. She fell down on the floor. Me, I

washed her dishes, and one dining-room girl took her home. When a teacher in the Commons heard about it, she went to Ollie's house to see. She took Ollie right away to the hospital. The next day poor Ollie was dead. Oh, I did cry for Ollie! I missed her so much. I used to love that poor woman.

The American doctors they ruin the people. I say, "People, don't go to the doctors! Let them alone!" Here in America everybody runs to the doctor. And those doctors! When you get a pain down here in your leg, they look in your mouth and say, "You have to pull out the teeth, that's all." [end page 251]

You get a pain in your stomach, and they say, "Take off the tonsils."

They tell you to take off all those things and they won't cure you till you do.

They won't! In Italia we don't take off nothing-we keep everything, and we are not sick. God gave us all those little things: what for the doctors take them off? It's not right. And then they tell you to open the window to sleep and let in all the germs from the night air. The American people ruin themselves by running all the time to those crazy doctors. But I mustn't say bad about the doctors because sometimes they do good too. God made them, so we've got to have them, that's all.

When I had those eleven days the terrible pain in my leg, the sciatica, the doctor he wanted to pull out my teeth, but I wouldn't let him; that's why he wouldn't cure me. But the soul of purgatory cured me without taking the teeth.

Another time I was so sick I was ready to die. When the doctor said I was going to die, I was not frightened; I was ready to call the priest and have the sacrament. But I was wishing that I could live just for the Holy Year. Miss

Taylor came from the Commons and stayed by me all night, and she was crying. I said, "Don't cry like that, Miss Taylor. I go to heaven and I'll pray God for you and for Chicago Commons."

The doctor was there listening to my heart and he said I have only a little while. But then he thought of something and he wrote it on a little paper and sent Luie running down to one drugstore that stayed open. In fifteen minutes Luie came back with some little pills. Six o'clock morning I began to get better and in one month I was up and well. And oh, I was thanking God that I got well and can live for the Holy Year. But my son-in-law, that new husband Visella got, he was mad at me that I didn't die when I was supposed to! He and Visella were figuring and figuring and running around to get all the money I had. And there I fooled them-I didn't die. They were so mad. The doctor told them before that it's better if they wait. My Luie didn't do like that: he didn't even ask about the money-he just kept saying to me, "You're going to be well again, Ma. You're going to be all right again! " [end page 252]

Oh, I was glad that I lived for that Eucharist Year in Chicago! It was 1926. If you died in that year you had the plenary indulgence-all your sins were forgiven-you went right to heaven. But even then I was not wishing to die.

Me, I'm not afraid of the death, but I never can forget that snake in the cemetery. One day me and my Visella went to fix the grave of Gionin. Nobody was there-only far over were one or two men doing the digging. We were walking quiet, quiet, because all that silence in the cemetery made us feel kind of scared. But we had to walk some more and we passed a new hole where the dirt was

just dug up. We looked in-I don't know what made us look in that hole-and there was a great big snake waiting to eat up the dead! No, I never can forget that day in the cemetery. But me, I'm not afraid of the death. I don't care if the worms and the snakes eat my body when the soul is not in. They can't hurt me then. When I come to my end, I won't need this old body anymore-let it go to the dust. Our body goes all back to the dirt but not the soul. The soul goes on. I'm not afraid, but I'm never wishing to die. I like to live.

Now I make for nine months the confession and Communion every first Friday for una buona morte-for a good death. I have only four more Fridays to go-I made five months already. Then I will have a good death. When it's my time I will die willing, without fighting God. I want to die quiet in my bed; I don't want to struggle.

But I don't wish that I die; I have it like heaven now. I'm really in heaven-no man to scold me and make me do this and stop me to do that. My Luie, so long he's not married, he lives with me, but he never scolds me for nothing. If I have his meal ready, all right; if no, all right too. I have my house to live and Luie pays the food, so I don't have to worry about the living. I keep my little job in the settlement house, so I have that money extra and I can go to the picture-show and see the good story. I have it like heaven-I'm my own boss. The peace I've got now it pays me for all the trouble I had in my life. I guess God says, "That poor Mis' Cavalleri, she suffered enough when she was a young girl in the silk factory. I'm going to let her have it easy now-she deserves it."

Of course sometimes I have a little trouble in my heart. It's like [end page 253] this, I guess: you know the mother, she all the time carries her baby on her right arm. When she puts him on her left arm he gets cross-he scolds and cries and doesn't like it. She can't hold him so good on her left arm. So God does to us. He always carries us on his right arm; when He changes and puts us on His left arm, we don't like it-it's not comfortable. But I always know where to go to get happy again. The Madonna is the one to take care for us poor women. You've got to have the faith in your heart-you've got to believe. But it's true and true: if you pray with all your heart and beg God and pray the Madonna you get help for sure. You get happy again. The Madonna, She helped me all through my life, and now She gives me peace.

Only one wish more I have: I'd love to go in Italia again before I die. Now I speak English good like an American I could go anywhere-where millionaires go and high people. I would look the high people in the face and ask them what questions I'd like to know. I wouldn't be afraid now-not of anybody. I'd be proud I come from America and speak English. I would go to Bugiarno and see the people and talk to the bosses in the silk factory. And to Canaletto. Those sisters would not throw me out when I come from America! I could talk to Superiora now. I'd tell her, "Why you were so mean-you threw out that poor girl whose heart was so kind toward you? You think you'll go to heaven like that? " I'd scold them like that now. I wouldn't be afraid. They wouldn't dare hurt me now I come from America. Me, that's why I love America. That's what I learned in America: not to be afraid. [end page 254]