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The Moon and the Bonfire

Cesare Pavese

美小说



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THE MOON AND THE BONFIRE

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CESARE PAVESE

Cesare Pavese, the son of a judiciary official in Turin, was born in 1908 on a farm in Piedmont. He was educated in Turin, where he took his literature degree with a thesis on Walt Whitman. He later became a schoolmaster.

In 1930 he began to contribute essays on American literature to *La Cultura*, of which he became the editor in 1934. Concurrently he began a series of translations of books by English and American writers (Defoe, Dickens, Joyce, Melville, Stein, and Faulkner), whose work exerted considerable influence not only on his own narrative style, but also on that of other Italian novelists.

In 1935 he was arrested for anti-Fascist activities and sentenced to preventive detention at the lonely sea-shore prison of Brancaleone Calabri. This formed the basis of his novel *The Political Prisoner* (*Il carcere*). Between 1936 and 1940 nine of his books were published in Italy, and these included novels, short stories, poetry, and essays. His novel *Among Women Only* (*Tra donne sole*) was awarded the Strega Prize.

He committed suicide in 1950. At the time of his death he was employed in the editorial department of an Italian publishing house.

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CESARE PAVESE

THE MOON AND THE
BONFIRE

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY
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I

THERE is a reason why I came back to this place – came back here instead of to Canelli, Barbaresco, or Alba. It is almost certain that I was not born here; where I was born I don't know. There is not a house or a bit of ground or a handful of dust hereabouts of which I can say: 'This was me before I was born.' I do not know whether I come from the hills or from the valleys, from the woods or from a great house with a balcony. Maybe the girl who laid me on the cathedral steps in Alba didn't come from the country either – maybe her people had a big house in town; anyhow I was carried there in the kind of basket they use at the grape harvest by two poor women from Monticello or Neive, or perhaps from Cravanzana, why not? Who knows whose flesh and blood I am? I have knocked about the world enough to know that one lot of flesh and blood is as good as another. But that's why you get tired and try to put down roots. To find somewhere where you belong so that you are worth more than the usual round of the seasons and last a bit longer.

If I grew up in this village it is thanks to Virgilia and Padrino – who are both gone now – even if the only reason they reared me was because the orphanage at Alessandria gave them so much a month. For forty years or so ago there were peasants hereabouts so poor that they took in bastards from an orphanage over and above the children they had already, simply to see a silver coin in their hands. Some people took a baby girl so that afterwards they would have a little servant whom they could order about better. Virgilia wanted me because she had two girls already and they hoped when I was a little older to settle down on a big farm where they

would all work together and be well off. At that time Padrino had the croft at Gaminella – two rooms and a stable – the goat, and the bank covered with hazels. I grew up there with the girls and we used to steal each other's polenta and sleep on the same palliasse. The elder one, Angiolina, was a year older than me and only when I was ten, during the winter when Virgilia died, did I learn by pure chance that I was not her brother. After that winter Angiolina, who was the sensible one, had to stop running about with us along the river bank and in the woods; she looked after the house and made the bread and the cheese. She it was who went to the town hall to draw the money for me. I used to boast to Giulia that I was worth five lire and told her she didn't bring in anything. Then I would ask Padrino why we didn't take in more bastards.

By now I realized that we were miserably poor, for only the poor brought up bastards from the orphanage. At first when they shouted bastard at me as I ran to school, I thought it was a word like coward or beggar and called them names. But although I was already a grown boy and the municipality didn't pay us any more money, I still didn't quite understand that not to be the son of Padrino and Virgilia meant that I had not been born in Gaminella and had not come from under the hazels or from our goat's ear like the girls.

Last year, the first time I came back to the village, I went almost stealthily to look at the hazels again. The hill at Gaminella was a long slope covered as far as the eye could see with vineyards and terraces, a slant so gradual that if you looked up you could not see the top – and on the top, somewhere, there are other vineyards and other woods and paths. This hill, then, looked as if it had been flayed by the winter and showed up the bareness of the earth and of the tree trunks. In the wintry light I saw its great mass falling gradually away towards Canelli, where our valley finishes. Along the

rough country road which follows the Belbo I came to the parapet of the little bridge and to the reed-bed. I saw on the bank the wall of the cottage with its huge blackened stones, the twisted fig tree, and the gaping window and I thought of the terrible winters there. But round about it the face of the land and the trees were changed; the clump of hazels had disappeared and our closely cut patch of millet grass grown smaller. From the byre an ox lowed and in the cold evening air I smelt the manure heap. So the man who had the croft now was not so badly off as we had been. I had always expected something like this or perhaps even that the cottage would have collapsed; I had imagined myself so often on the parapet of the bridge wondering how I could possibly have spent so many years in this hole, walking these few paths, taking the goat to pasture and looking for apples which had rolled down the bank, sure that the world ended where the road overhung the Belbo. But I had not expected not to find the hazels any more. That was the end of everything. These changes made me so cast down that I didn't call out or go on to the threshing-floor. There and then I understood what it meant not to be born in a place, not to have it in my blood and be already half-buried there along with my forebears so that any change of crops didn't matter much. Of course there were some clumps of the same hazels on the hillsides and I could still find them, but if *I* had been the owner of this stretch of river bank I would rather have cleared it and sown it with grain; as it was, it had the same effect on me as those rooms you rent in the city, where you live for a day – or for a year – and then when you move on they stay bare and empty shells; they are not really yours, they are dead.

It was a good job that in the evening I turned my back on Gaminella and had in front of me the ridges of the hill at Salto on the other side of the Belbo with

its broad meadows which tapered away towards the summit. And lower on this hill, too, there were stretches of trees, and the paths and the scattered farms were there as I had seen them day in, day out, year in, year out, sitting on the beam behind the cottage or on the parapet of the bridge.

Then all these years until I was called up – when I was a hand on the farm they call La Mora, in the rich plain beyond the Belbo, and when Padrino had sold his croft at Gaminella and gone with the girls to Cossano – I had only to raise my eyes from the fields to see the vineyards high up on Salto and the way they sloped gradually down towards Canelli, towards the railway and the whistle of the train which ran along by the Belbo morning and evening, making me think of wonders, of stations and cities.

Thus it was that for a long time I thought this village where I had not been born was the whole world. Now that I have really seen the world and know that it is made up of a whole lot of little villages, I am not sure that I was so far wrong when I was a boy. You wander over land and sea just as the lads who were young with me used to go to the festas in the villages round about and dance and drink and fight and bring home flags and barked knuckles. Or you grow grapes and sell them at Canelli; or gather truffles and take them to Alba. There is Nuto, my friend from Salto, who supplies all the valley as far as Cannio with wooden buckets and wine-presses. What does it all mean then? That you need a village, if only for the pleasure of leaving it. Your own village means that you are not alone, that you know there's something of you in the people and the plants and the soil, that even when you are not there it waits to welcome you. But it isn't easy to stay there quietly. For a year now I have had an eye on it and have taken a trip out there from Genoa whenever I could; but it still evades me. Time and ex-

perience teach you these things. Is it possible that at forty, after all my travelling, I still don't know what it is to have a village?

There's one thing I can't get used to. Everyone here thinks I have come back to buy a house for myself and they call me the American and show off their daughters. This ought to please a man who left without even a name, and indeed it does. But it isn't enough. I like Genoa, too; I like to know that the world is round, and to have one foot on the gangway. From the time when, as a boy, I leant on my spade at the farm-gate at La Mora and listened to the chatter of people who had nothing better to do as they passed by on the main road – ever since that time, for me, the little hills round Canelli are doors opening on the world. Nuto, who, compared with me, has never been far from Salto, says that if you want to make a life of it in the valley you mustn't ever leave it. Yet he's the one who, when he was still a young lad, got the length of playing the clarinet in the band beyond Canelli and as far away even as Spigno and Ovada, over there where the sun rises. We speak about it from time to time and he laughs.

2

THIS summer I put up at the Albergo dell'Angelo in the village square, where no one knew me any more, I have grown so big and fat. And I didn't know anyone in the village either; in my time we came there very seldom, for we stayed on the roads or in the dry water-courses or on the threshing-floor. The village lies very far up the valley, and the Belbo flows in front of the church a good half-hour before it widens out at the foot of the hills where I live.

I had come to have a rest for a fortnight or so and it

happened to be the Feast of the Assumption. So much the better, for the comings and goings of strangers and the confusion and uproar in the square would have made even a nigger hard to pick out. I heard them shouting and singing and playing, and as darkness fell there were fires and squibs; they drank and jeered and walked in processions, and all night for three nights they kept up the dancing in the square, and from it there rose the sound of roundabouts and horns and the crack of air-guns. The very noises, the very wine, the very faces of long ago. The little boys who ran about among the people's feet were the same; the scarves, the yokes of oxen, the women with stockings on their sun-burnt legs, the scent and the sweat, all these were the same. And so was the happiness and the tragedy and the promises made on the banks of the Belbo. The difference was that once upon a time, with my first pay in my hand, I had flung myself into the festivities, at the shooting-booth and on the swings, and we had made the little girls with pigtails cry and none of us boys knew yet why men and women, sleek-headed young men and girls in their pride, met each other and chose each other, laughed in each other's faces and danced together. The difference was that now I knew why they did it – and that these days were past. I had left the valley when I had just begun to understand. Nuto who had stayed, Nuto the joiner at Salto, my accomplice in our first escapades at Canelli, had already played the clarinet for ten years at all the high days and holidays, at all the dances in the valley. For him the world had been a round of festivities these ten years back; he knew all the hard drinkers and all the mountebanks and all the village gaiety.

This last year, every time I've tried to get away from things, I've looked him up. His house stands half-way up the side of Salto and looks on to the highway; there is a smell of newly sawn wood there, of flowers and

shavings which, in my first days at La Mora, seemed to belong to another world because I came from a poor cottage with a threshing-floor – a smell which meant the main road and the bands and the big houses at Canelli where I had never been yet.

Now Nuto is married and a grown man; he works himself and has men working for him but his house is still the same, and in the sunshine it smells of oleanders and geraniums, for he has pots of them in the windows and in front of the house. The clarinet is hung on the end of the cupboard; underfoot are the shavings which they throw in bucketfuls into a watercourse at the foot of Salto – a watercourse full of acacia and ferns and elders, always dry in summer.

Nuto tells me that he had to make up his mind either to be a joiner or to play in the band, and so after ten years of festas he laid aside the clarinet on the death of his father. When I told him where I had been he said that he had already had news of me from some people from Genoa, and that in the village they told a tale that before I left I had found a pot of gold under the pier of the bridge.

We joked about it. 'Now perhaps,' I said, 'even my father will come to light.'

'Your father – *you* are your father,' he said.

'In America there's one good thing – they're all bastards.'

'That's another thing that should be put right,' replied Nuto. 'Why should there be people who have no name or home? Aren't we all human beings?'

'Leave things as they are. I got there even without a name.'

'*You* have got there,' said Nuto, 'and no one dare taunt you with it any more; but what about those who haven't? You don't know what a lot of poor devils there still are hereabouts. When I went round with the band, on every doorstep there were idiots and half-wits

and byblows, children of drunkards and ignorant servant-girls, forced to live on crusts and cabbage-stalks. Some people even made fun of them. You managed it,' said Nuto, 'because for good or ill, you found a home. You ate very little at Padrino's, but you did eat. There's no use telling others to make good – we've got to help them.'

I like speaking to Nuto; we are men now and we know each other, but long ago in these days at La Mora, when I worked on the farm, he was three years older than I was and knew already how to whistle and play the guitar; his opinion was sought after and listened to; he argued with grown men and with us boys and he winked at the women. Even then I was always at his heels and sometimes played truant to go along the watercourse with him or even in the Belbo to look for nests. He told me what to do if I wanted to be thought well of at La Mora and then in the evening he came into the courtyard and sat late talking with the farm-hands.

And now he was telling me of his life in the band. Round about us were the villages where he had been; by day they shone in the sunlight, picked out by clumps of trees, by night they were nests of stars in the black sky. When he and the rest of the band, whom he taught on Saturday nights in a shed at the station, arrived at the fair, they were full of high spirits; then for the next two or three days they never shut an eye and they stopped playing only to eat – away went the clarinet for the glass, the glass for the fork, then back they went to clarinet or cornet or trumpet. Then they ate a bit more and drank a bit more, then came a solo and after that a snack and then a huge supper, and they'd stay awake till morning. There were festas, processions, and marriages, and contests with the rival bands. On the morning of the second and third days they got down from the platform with their eyes pop-

ping out of their heads and it was a relief to dash their faces in a bucket of water and maybe throw themselves flat on the meadow grass among the carts and wagons and the droppings of the horses and oxen.

'Who paid for all this?' I used to say. The local authorities, a rich family perhaps, or an ambitious man, all these footed the bill. And those who came to eat, he said, were always the same.

And you should have heard what they ate. I kept remembering the suppers they told about at La Mora, suppers of other villages and other times. But the dishes they served were still the same, and when I heard about them I seemed to be back in the farm-kitchen at La Mora and to see the women busy grating and making the pasta and stuffing and lifting the lids off and blowing up the fire, and the taste of it all came back to me, and I heard again the crackling of the broken vine shoots.

'You loved it,' I said to him. 'Why did you give it up? Because your father died?'

And Nuto said that, first of all, playing doesn't put much in your pocket, and you end by being fed up with all this waste and never being quite sure who pays for it.

'Then there was the war,' he said. 'The girls' feet still itched to dance, I suppose, but who was there to dance with them now? People found other ways of amusing themselves in the war years.'

'Still, I like music,' went on Nuto, thinking it over, 'it's only a pity it's a bad master. It gets to be a bad habit and you have to give it up. My father used to say that it was worse than running after women.'

'Ah, yes,' I said to him, 'how have you got on with the women? You liked them once. You see them all at the dancing.'

Nuto has a way of laughing and whistling together even when he is being serious.

'You haven't produced anything for the orphanage at Alessandria?'

'I hope not,' he said. 'For every one like you, how many poor little devils there are.'

Then he told me that, of the two, he preferred music. Sometimes they would get together at nights when they were coming home late, and play and play, he and the man with the cornet and the one with the mandoline, going along the main road in the dark far from houses, far from women, far from the dogs who replied with frantic barking, just playing.

'I've never serenaded anyone,' he said. 'If a girl is pretty, it's not music she's looking for. She wants to cut a figure in front of the other girls – it's a man she's after. I've never met a girl yet who could see the point of music.'

Nuto noticed that I was laughing and said quickly, 'I'll tell you something: I had an oboe-player, Arboreto, who played so many serenades that we used to say about him, "It's not love they make, these two, it's music."'

This is how we talked on the main road, or drinking a glass of wine at his window, and below us lay the valley of the Belbo, and the aspens which marked its course and, in front, the great hill at Gaminella, all vineyards and overgrown watercourses. How long was it since I had drunk this wine?

'Have I told you yet,' I said to Nuto, 'that Cola wants to sell?'

'Only the land?' he said. 'Watch he doesn't sell you the bed as well.'

'Is it a palliasse or a feather bed?' I said through my teeth. 'I am old.'

'All the feather beds turn into old sacks,' replied Nuto. Then he said, 'Have you been to look at La Mora yet?'

That was it – I hadn't been there. It was only a few

steps from the house at Salto and I hadn't gone. I knew that the old man and his daughters and the boys and the farm-hands were all scattered, all gone, some dead, some far away. Only Nicoletto was left, that half-witted young nephew of his, who had called bastard after me so often, treading on my toes – and half the stuff was sold.

'One day I'll go. I'm back now,' I said.

3

OF Nuto and his music I had had news in America, of all places – how long ago was it? – when I still had no intention of coming back, when I'd chucked the railway squad and had arrived in California, travelling from station to station, and when I saw these long slopes in the sunshine, I had said, 'I'm home now.' Even America came to an end in the sea and this time there was no sense in taking ship again so I stopped among the pine trees and the vineyards. 'If they saw me at home with my hoe in my hand, how they would laugh.' But they don't use a hoe in California. They're more like gardeners. I met some Piedmontese and I was fed up; it wasn't worth while travelling across so much of the world only to see people like myself who looked at me askance besides. So I cleared out of the country districts and got a job as a milkman at Oakland. In the evening, across the waters of the bay, you could see the lights of San Francisco. I went there and starved for a month, and when I came out of prison I was at the stage where I envied the Chinese. By this time I wondered if it was worth while travelling round the world to see anyone. I went back to the hills.

I had been living there for a bit and I had got a girl whom I didn't like any longer now that she worked in

the same joint as myself. Because she'd come so often to meet me at the door, she'd been taken on as cashier and now all day she gazed at me over the counter while I fried the bacon and filled the glasses. In the evening I left the shop and she came to meet me, running along the pavement in her high heels, and wanting us to stop a car to go down to the sea or to go to the cinema. The moment we were away from the light of the eating-house, we were alone in the starlight among the din of the cicadas and frogs. I wished I could have taken her into the fields among the apple trees and the clumps of wood or even among the short grass on the roadsides and thrown her down on the earth and given some meaning to all the uproar under the stars. She wasn't having any. She shrieked like women do and wanted to go to another joint. Before you could lay hands on her – we had a room in a side-street in Oakland – she had to be tight.

It was one of these nights that I heard about Nuto. From a man who came from Bubbio. I recognized him by his build and his walk before he even opened his mouth. He was driving a lorry-load of timber and while they were filling up his petrol tanks outside he asked me for a beer.

'A bottle of wine would be better,' I said in our dialect, my lips pressed tight together.

His eyes laughed and he looked at me. We talked all evening, until they'd nearly broken his horn outside. From the till, Nora listened with all her ears and began to fidget, but Nora had never been in Alessandria and she didn't understand. In the end, I even poured my friend out a glass of bootleg whisky. He told me he'd been a lorry-driver at home and the names of the villages he'd gone round and why he'd come to America. 'But if I'd known that they drink this sort of stuff. . . . There's no denying, it warms you up, but there's no wine hereabouts.'