# RADICOFANI

THE Via Cassia—the ancient highway from Rome to Siena and Florence, named after Cassius, the consul—reaches its highest point about halfway along its course, at the village of Radicofani, twenty-nine hundred and forty feet above sea level. The road twists between hillocks and ridges of clay, up and up, to the summit. To motorists, the name denotes, more than the village, the bleak and desolate mountain—steepness, and horseshoe curves, and screeching of tires, and remoteness.

Most of the land is barren, but here and there, where the mountain isn't too steep, it is plowed for wheat. The harvests are scanty, for the clay sheds the rain, and, with no trees to hold it, the water rushes to the valley, carrying seeds with it and carving great, gray, gutterlike channels. In some places, the clay is so pure that nothing will grow on it, and it looks poisonous. Under the strong sun, the clay bakes and cracks the way a statue that hasn't been hollowed cracks when it is fired and becomes terra cotta. Layer upon layer, wave after wave, crack over crack, the pale clay has molded itself into ridges and mounds. Looking at it, one is tempted to say that this isn't earth but a sort of white lava.

A few hundred feet from the village, on the very top of the mountain, is Radicofani's medieval castle, gray as the mountain it stands on. It has outer walls and a tower, both in a state of disrepair. The walls are especially dilapidated; one has the impression that they have been used more than once as a quarry. The door to the tower hangs open, because the wood is so warped it doesn't fit the jamb any more. Inside, the wooden staircase, hugging the four walls and leaving a great chasm in the middle, is missing several steps. At some risk, one can still climb it. Then, from the terrace at the top of the tower, one has an unobstructed view of the farthest horizon—to the north, one can see the hills of Siena, over forty miles away. Sheltered by the castle walls are a few trees—a pale olive tree, a stubby mulberry—overpruned, cut and recut, not given a chance. From the tower all that one sees of the village is the terra-cotta tiles. They cover two rows of about fifty houses. Between them is a narrow paved street—the Via Cassia as it originally went. Today, the through traffic doesn't enter the village but passes a little below it. Here on the bypass there are two gasoline stations and a couple of cafés. There is also an old, square, solid building with four open arches, a portico, and four large wooden doors. It is the old posthouse. Once, the stone floor of the portico must have rung with the sound of iron wheels and shod hoofs; now it is silent and the doors of the stables are shut. The gasoline stations, however, are quite busy, for this is still the main road between Florence and Rome.

OF all roads, the Via Cassia is the road I know best. It is the road of my childhood. From my home, near Siena, Radicofani could be seen as a blue, distant peak dominating the way to the south. Often I would point it out to travellers. "That's Radicofani. The road to Rome goes through it."

"You mean we have to go up there?"

"Yes, all the way up."

I knew it from having been there more than once. Every Christmas, my father would drive the whole family down to Rome for a visit. At various points along the way, Radicofani would be visible in the distance. It would become more and more awesome as we approached. It seemed almost incredible to me that a road should go like that to the top of what from a distance looked like a cone. Sometimes it was white with snow, and it was a question whether we would be able to get through. This made the trip very exciting. Once, the snow was so deep we had to drive back all the way to Siena and take the longer, coastal route through Grosseto. But even without snow the climb was dramatic—in those days the road was narrower and in some stretches steeper than it is now. When we reached the top, we usually gave my father a cheer.

I remember the Via Cassia just after the war, the sides of the road—especially at Radicofani—littered with the remains of German tanks. All along the way, the treads of war machines had left deep marks in the asphalt, and pits had formed where spilled gasoline had dissolved it.

But it was in the postwar years that I came to know the road best, and particularly the Radicofani part, for then I began to ride over it on a light motor scooter I had bought. I was studying at the University of Rome at the time, and one day in the winter of 1948, when I was going up to Siena for a holiday, the engine failed me about two miles below Radicofani. I had to push the scooter up to the village. There was no garage, and the men at the gasoline pumps directed me to a blacksmith, whose shop was at the northern end of the bypass, near where it was joined by the street that ran through the village. Even before I arrived there, the wind brought the sound of his hammering to me. From the open door I saw the blacksmith deep inside the shop, framed by red-spoked cart wheels, strings of horseshoes, tongs, and coils of wire—all hanging from the walls and ceiling. He was intently forging an iron. His hammer would not so much strike the iron he held in his tongs as heavily fall on it. After each fall, the hammer would

bounce and then fall on the iron again, very lightly, producing a musical sound and giving a moment of rest to his hand. I watched the incandescent iron in his tongs, blinked at each blow, listened to the hiss of the water, looked at his foot on the bellows, at the response of the brazier, at the iron resting in it becoming again incandescent, then reddening under the blows, then dimming as it lost more of its heat. I didn't want to interrupt. I wanted to see each step over and over. Pushing the motor scooter along, I went closer. There was a smell of rust and burning coal, rather than of oil and exhaust fumes as in garages. He seemed to belong to the time of coaches, not of automobiles, and I wondered whether he would even look at my scooter.

I expected him to pause or at least glance my way, but he continued in what looked like an effortless rhythm. At last, I decided to speak. "Excuse me," I said. "Coming up the mountain my motor scooter broke down and I wonder if you could repair it."

He didn't stop hammering right away but kept me waiting till the bright red iron became dull. Then he laid his tongs and hammer aside.

Slowly—his arms were more agile than the rest of his frame—he turned toward me and crouched to examine the engine. He rattled something. "This piece is broken," he said, pointing at a part of the transmission.

"I don't suppose I can get a new one in Radicofani," I said.

"No, but I can make you one," he said.

He disassembled the motor till he could free the broken piece, then took it and looked at it, turning it around and around in his hands.

"Can it be welded?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Not this," he said.

He took from a box a length of metal. Metal, the way he handled it, seemed full of possibilities—essence. But he discarded it. He took another piece. With the broken part in front of him for reference, he began forging the new one. Again I watched him, fascinated by the fire and his skill. After a few minutes, I asked him how long it would take him to finish. He seemed annoyed by my question—wasn't his work, no less than a work of art, full of imponderables? "An hour or two, maybe," he said.

I WALKED down to the posthouse. It looked massive. Beside it the gasoline stations seemed sheds. There it stood on the wayside—a relic, outmoded, used to store, not to shelter; perhaps not used at all. Inside the four wooden doors, there probably had been room for fifty horses. This must have been a very important posthouse indeed, I thought. The nearest villages—Acquapendente to the south and San Quirico to the north—were each nearly twenty miles away on the steep, winding road. In my mind I could see the teams of horses breathing hard up the mountain, the vaporous breath from their nostrils in winter, the sweat foaming on their haunches in summer, the passengers descending, stamping their feet, looking at the bleak mountainside below them, at the castle and at the rows of houses above them. Shelley had probably stopped here, and Byron, and in remoter times Milton. I thought of Stendhal, of Foscolo and Galileo; of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael. I thought of Petrarch. Centuries before him, Charlemagne had probably stamped his feet here, and, two millenniums ago, Julius Caesar, and Cassius the consul, before Julius Caesar was born.

I wondered how long the stagecoaches stopped here. Just long enough to unhitch the old team and hitch on the new? Or did the passengers have time for a meal? I knew that stagecoaches travelled about fifty miles in one day, and that, important a relay station as Radicofani must have been, it was too close to Siena to be an overnight stop—on their way from Florence to Rome, passengers usually passed the first night in Siena and the second in Acquapendente. At Acquapendente there was a well-known inn, and many famous people had signed its register. Poets were asked to write a verse. An English poet wrote:

> I can think of *niente*
> To rhyme with Acquapendente.

And yet, in bad weather no coach could have reached Acquapendente from Siena in one day; it was a distance of nearly sixty miles. Of course bad weather, accidents, brigands, and other delays must have caused many travellers to stop here for the night. There was no question about it—many famous people of the past had slept in Radicofani, too.

I said to myself, "I have two hours; why don't I go and look for signatures at the local hotel? I might find something even better than what the English poet wrote at Acquapendente. Shakespeare's own signature might be in the attic!"

I don't know why I thought of Shakespeare—I didn't know whether Shakespeare had ever left England. Perhaps it was the extreme rarity of his signature that made me think of him. Or perhaps it was that so many of his plays are set in Italy. Anyway, the thought of Shakespeare's signature excited me. In my mind I was already in the attic in front of a pile of old registers that became older and older the nearer one got to the bottom. Already I was drawing out the very bottom book, opening it, and, after turning a few pages, seeing Shakespeare's signature staring at me—not the unsteady, tremulous hand that we know but a cursive,


*"Mother, am I poisonous?"*

• •

impatient one, followed by his Stratford on Avon address and a verse that made the one written in the hotel at Acquapendente seem like prose.

I was hurrying now—almost running—up to the center of the village. I found the inn (it was the only one in Radicofani) halfway along the street. The building was old—as old as any in Radicofani, I thought. Not old, I corrected myself—ancient. Its travertine, hard stone though it is, had lost its sharp edge at the corners. It was smooth everywhere. Here and there it was glossy. "This house is as old as the castle," I said to myself. "Perhaps even older. The castle was probably built later to defend these two rows of houses."

The front door of the inn—two thick boards of dark wood—was open, and I went up a few steps to a glass-panelled door with the word "*Locanda*" across it in old-style italic. A good sign, I thought. I went in. There was a narrow hall with a door on either side and a staircase at the end. The door on the left led into the dining room, which had a few bare wooden tables and a big brown stove of glazed terra cotta. I chose a table near the stove and sat down. A woman peered in at me from the kitchen, withdrew, and soon a chubby waiter came in. He began setting the table.

"Is this an old hotel?" I said.

His hand spiralled up, describing the vortex of time. "Very old," he said. After his gesture, the words were an anticlimax.

"How old?" I asked. "Do you know?"

"The present owner— no, what am I saying? His *father* bought it in nineteen hundred; but it was a hotel before that. It has always been here."

"The guests it must have seen!" I said. "Famous people must have stopped here. Who knows, perhaps even Garibaldi."

"It could be," he said.

I asked for a plate of spaghetti. He disappeared, and twenty minutes passed before he came back with the dish. During that time, my thoughts hadn't veered from the idea of the poets and Old Masters who might have stayed here. In my mind the hotel registers had taken on the splendor of illuminated medieval manuscripts; I was quite outside this age of passports and identity cards.

"Do you have any of the old registers?" I asked him.

"Registers?" he said.

"Yes, with the names of the people who have stayed here in the past."

"You want to see them?"

"It would be interesting," I said.

He left in the direction of the kitchen.

## WATER COLOR OF GRANTCHESTER MEADOWS

(Cambridge, England)

There, spring lambs jam the sheepfold. In air
Stilled, silvered as water in a glass,
Nothing is big or far.
The small shrew chitters from its wilderness
Of grassheads and is heard.
Each thumb-size bird
Flits nimble-winged in thickets, and of good color.

Cloud rack and owl-hollowed willows slanting over
The bland Granta double their white-and-green
World under the sheer water
And ride that flux at anchor, upside down.
The punter sinks his pole.
In Byron's pool
Cattails part where the tame cygnets steer.

It is a country on a nursery plate.
Spotted cows revolve their jaws, and crop
Red clover or gnaw beetroot,
Bellied on a nimbus of sun-glazed buttercup.
Hedging meadows of benign
Arcadian green,
The blood-berried hawthorn hides its spines with white.

Droll, vegetarian, the water rat
Saws down a reed and swims from his limber grove,
While the students stroll or sit
Rapt in the moony indolence of love—
Black-gowned, but unaware
How in such mild air
The owl shall stoop from his turret, the rat cry out.

—Sylvia Plath

• •

A few minutes later, he appeared at the hall door, accompanied by a stocky, elderly man. They both looked anxious. The elderly man led the way. "You want to see the registers?" he said. "Are you an inspector?"

"No, no," I said. "Nothing of the sort," and I laughed, then explained to him what I meant. "I'm interested in them purely from a historical point of view," I said.

He looked relieved and turned to scold the waiter for having alarmed him. "The gentleman speaks plainly enough," he said to him.

"I should have made myself clearer," I said.

"Old registers," he said, turning back to me. "We don't have any."

I could see that he wanted to end the matter. "I thought that perhaps in your attic or somewhere you might have some." I spoke with the feeling one puts into lost causes. "Just one famous signature and you'd be rich. I know a lady in Rome, a certain Signora Rossini, who was able to buy a house with a signature of Shelley."

"A whole house?" he said.

"Yes. Who knows, perhaps Shelley came by here and stopped in this very hotel."

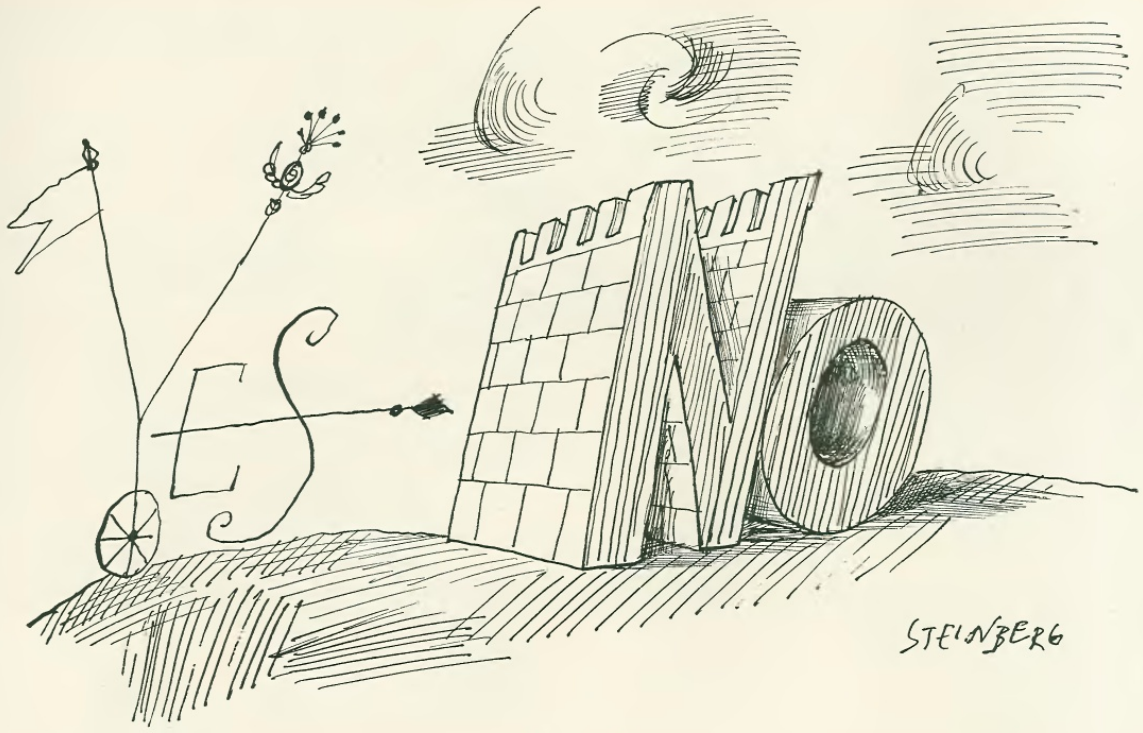
"Shell . . ." he said.

"An English poet. Or Byron, or Leopardi, or Foscolo," I said. The names didn't seem to make an impression. "Or Milton," I went on. "Or Shakespeare."

"Shake-a-spear," he said, his face at last lighting up. "I have seen 'Giulietta e Romeo' in Acquapendente."

"With *his* signature you could buy the whole of Radicofani," I said. "Why don't we look? Perhaps you have some old books you've forgotten about. There may be a treasure in your attic."

"Really?" he said. "Up here in Radicofani?"




"This is a great route," I said. "The great thoroughfare between Florence and Rome—the Via Cassia, not just another road."

He seemed impressed. He seemed so impressed that for a moment I was afraid I had said too much; he might become too jealous of his registers to want to show them to me, if indeed they did exist.

"I am not an expert," I said. "But if you have anything worthwhile, I think I would be able to tell you."

"I believe you," he said. He poured me another glass of wine. "You finish eating and then we'll go and see."

I ate the rest of the meal quickly and asked the waiter how much it was. But the owner laid his hand between us. He wouldn't let me pay. I was scarcely able to leave the waiter a tip.

The owner went into the kitchen for a candle; then I followed him up the stairs. At the third floor, the staircase became steep and narrow. At the top, he unlocked a door, lit the candle, and led the way into the attic.

It was a windowless room with a low ceiling, a water tank, and some broken furniture. I followed him, looking sharply at every object. He was already shaking his head when I saw under a table a pile of large, rather thin album-like books. There must have been a dozen of them. "There they are," I said.

We went over and opened the top one. Page after page of numbers—it was an account book. I opened another. The same—more figures. Halfway down the pile, I began finding names and dates, where guests had registered. I looked at the dates. They were much too recent. Nervously, I drew out the bottom book and opened it. There were names and addresses, each written in a different hand. I turned a few pages.

"Oh!" I said, with such excitement that the old man started and the candle almost went out. "I've found something! Here is the name of my father, my mother, and the names of my two brothers, and my own. December 23rd, 1928."

I closed the book. "My father used to drive us to Rome every Christmas. We must have stopped here that night. I was too small to remember. Perhaps you were here."

"Yes," he said. "I was here in 1928."

"We had a convertible—a blue Chevrolet."

I could see his eyes roving down the scale of the years. At last, they stopped roving—he couldn't remember.

We went downstairs.

"Let me pay you for my dinner," I said in the hall.

But he still wouldn't let me.

"I am sorry I couldn't find any valuable signatures for you," I said.

"You found yourself," he said. "What more do you want?"

AT the blacksmith's, the motor scooter was ready—reassembled, waiting for me, leaning against a wall. The blacksmith came over and started the engine. It roared. I was enthusiastic and praised him, but he turned away from my praise back to his work.

I went on. The long descent, the night air exhilarated me. It seemed I would never reach the foot of the mountain. It seemed I was descending the spiral of time that the waiter had described, down the years, to my childhood that I had found locked up there in the attic. Around a curve I skidded and fell. It brought me back to the present. Picking myself up, unhurt, and the scooter, undamaged, I said to myself, "Now I really know Radicofani well."

—ARTURO VIVANTE

•

REPUBLICAN

JOHN R. HARRELL, LOUISVILLE

Springfield College and University of Arkansas; businessman and farmer. "The Lord, on April 20. 1959, told my wife and I I was to run. I could give numbers of other qualifications but it would not compare with the above."—*The Illinois Voter, published by the League of Women Voters of Illinois.*

You thought about the atheist vote? And the grammarians?