

# MARIO THE SMUGGLER

I FIRST HEARD about Mario the smuggler in a small café in one of the fashionable resort towns on Lake Maggiore. A local friend and I had got to talking over a bottle of wine and the subject of smuggling came up. It is one of the leading subterranean industries in the lake towns near the Swiss-Italian border and a favorite topic of guarded conversation. My friend told me that nowadays the traffic was mostly in cigarettes; before the war it was coffee. But many other commodities, because of disparity in price be-

tween the two countries, can be profitably sneaked over the border. As Italy, like Spain and France, has a state monopoly on tobacco and as, perhaps in consequence of this, popular priced Italian cigarettes are notoriously vile, there is good money for anyone who can provide Swiss Virginia leaf cigarettes below the Italian government's fixed price. This can be done by buying duty-free Swiss brands "for export" and spiriting them over into Italy, where they are sold under the counter in bars and cafés, coffee houses and res-

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taurants, and even on the streets by the small entrepreneurs whose little stands litter the sidewalks of Milan, Trieste, Rome, Naples, and other Italian cities.

There are hazards, of course, my friend said. You run the risk of arrest by the *finanzi*, or border guards, and even of getting shot, but these do not deter the local contrabandists. Most smugglers nowadays, he said, cross the frontier by land, although some still try to sneak stuff across the imaginary boundary line that bisects Lake Maggiore; they even tried homemade torpedoes, carrying payloads, to shove goods across under water, but anti-submarine nets took care of that. There are whole towns, my friend told me, in which the chief source of revenue is smuggling. One such town — he named it but I shall call it Buzano — was on the lake not far away. Nine out of ten of the males in that village were smugglers by occupation, as their fathers and grandfathers had been before them — although, he added, you'd never guess it if you visited Buzano. It looks like any other Italian farm village, he said, and the inhabitants don't talk to strangers.

"Who runs the smuggling?" I asked him. "Who are the big shots?"

"Well," he said. "In Buzano it's a fellow named Mario. He's a real business man and a smart organizer and he knows the mountains. He

employs up to fifty men at a time. I guess you'd call him the local boss hereabouts."

He told me some more about Mario — I never heard a last name, even after I met him — how he'd started smuggling at the age of seventeen, when Buzano boys are first allowed to go on a run with their fathers, and how he'd quickly risen to the top. Mario had a natural talent for evading authority and he was a born leader. Now, my friend said, Mario is about ready to retire, even though he's only thirty-five. He drives a Fiat sedan, he owns two-dozen striped shirts, wears a solid gold wrist watch and, when you consider he clears around \$5000 on one smuggling operation, you can see he must have plenty of cash.

I said I'd like to meet this man and talk to him and was somewhat surprised when, in response to what was more or less an idle remark, my friend said: "If you're interested, go and see this fellow" — he scribbled a name and address on a piece of paper — "and tell him I sent you. This man is a baker and he could put you in touch with Mario."

The next morning I started out for the bake-shop and began what proved to be a complicated, week-long series of negotiations, at the end of which I met Mario.

I WAS SITTING ON a bench looking out over the lake one afternoon when a short, square-bodied man

dressed in a striped shirt, brown pants, and two-toned shoes suddenly sat himself down beside me and began studying me with hard brown eyes set in a ruddy moon-face.

"You wanted to see me?" this man said at last. "Why?" There was no self-introduction, nor did he offer to shake hands, but I knew who he must be. I said, a little lamely, that I was interested in him from a purely journalistic viewpoint; and added, somewhat audaciously, "I'd like to go with you on one of your excursions across the border." He studied me some more in silence, a level look of cunning and amusement in his eyes. Abruptly, he said: "*Va bene*. If you want to come along with us it is all right with me. We don't go for a day or two. I will let you know — you have my word."

The baker, who turned out to be Mario's cousin, was to bring me word of the meeting place. When no one turned up after a couple of days, I decided that Mario or his friends had the wind up and that the whole thing was off. I decided not to wait around the town any longer. I packed my bags and came down into the lobby to check out of my hotel and there, in the lobby, was Mario.

"Ho," he said when he saw me. "You did not believe me, eh?" I told him I'd given him up and he chided me.

"I gave you my word, didn't I? If you still want to, meet me to-

morrow morning at eight." He told me where — at the steamer landing in a lakeside town nearby — and went off with a wave of his arm.

I drove in my little car down to the town that evening and took a room over a waterfront restaurant that overlooked the square. I was beginning to feel like a conspirator; at the same time I wondered just what I was getting into. Thinking it over that night, it occurred to me that the reason it had taken me so long to get in touch with Mario was that he and his colleagues had wanted time to check up on me around town. Evidently I had passed the dubious distinction of being okay with them but I still only half-believed Mario would show up. There was something about him that suggested he might enjoy an involved practical joke.

Sure enough, though, next morning, when the little steamer put in, Mario strolled off onto the pier with the disembarking crowd. He was dressed as he had been when I first saw him and was carrying a jacket over his arm, for the day was warm; I watched from my window as he paused and slicked his black hair down with a pocket comb, then I went down and sat in my car, as we had agreed, to wait for him. He came up soon and this time shook hands. He gave the directions to get out of the town by a dirt road that twisted back and forth up into the mountains. As we drove along, he

asked me short questions and gave laconic orders, which, with my sketchy Italian, was just as well: "Got a passport? Don't show it to the Italians but it's all right to let the Swiss see it. Got a gun? Good, none of us carry them, either." I told him I had a hunting knife. "Leave it in the car," he said. "I have this." He showed me a small, sharp, sickle-shaped knife — the kind peasants carry in that part of the world.

As he took it out of his pocket, what looked like two halves of a five-lira note fluttered to the floor. "You've sliced your money," I remarked. "No," he said, picking them up. "These are my receipts." Later I found out how that worked.

"If we are stopped," Mario said, "you don't know me. You never heard of me, see? Just happened to pick me up along the road." He was staring out of the windshield, preoccupied yet watchful. Presently he pointed a thick finger at a small mountain inn and said: "Drive in the courtyard."

The proprietress of the inn greeted Mario and set before us two bottles of beer — a popular café-drink among the North Italian mountain folk. We gulped it down, then Mario rose, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and strolled out the door, gesturing for me to follow. We were off over the mountains — and a very unlikely pair of Alpinists we looked, dressed in city

suits, without axes, poles, ropes or hob-nailed boots.

IT WAS A grueling climb. Mario at once set a relentless pace, climbing, always ahead of me, without visible effort despite his two hundred pounds and keeping his eyes sharp about him. The air was fine and the sun warm on the mountain-side. Our path up was bordered by tiny wild Alpine flowers, pastel pink and blue; the farmlands about us — fields of grain and vegetables and grazing patches — were of varying greens and were cut into rectangular shapes by fieldstone walls beside which goats frolicked. I was, however, not able to appreciate this *pastorale*. Within twenty minutes I had become badly winded and felt the full weight of the beer I'd drunk. My muscles were stiff and wrenched; I got a panicky feeling that, in spite of pride or will to press on, I might involuntarily cry out I was done for and sink to the ground. After a while I got my second wind, which is a poor thing but better than nothing; I prayed there would be a third.

On our way up we met occasional peasants, men and women, going down to town. They looked at Mario with seeming recognition but did not speak. "*Sono amici*," he said to me after one couple had passed. "But it's better that I say nothing to them. If the patrol asks questions, these people can say they haven't

seen us." Mario's world was compartmented neatly — friends and enemies, *amici* and *nemici*.

Above the last farm, we left the path and struck out through copse and wild pastures. We climbed for three hours. We crossed and re-crossed a dirt road, which seemed a friendly sign of civilization until Mario told me it was used solely to supply the border guards and their stations. I then took a different view of it.

We rested rarely. Mario would hear my rasping breathing and stand still a moment, looking at me with quizzical amusement. I could see he was proud of his staying power, especially now, beside the gasping *Americano*. Once when we paused in a thicket he pointed through the thick growth and said, "Look." I peered through and saw a ridge above us and a small yellow house with a red roof perched on a saddle between two peaks; it looked quite near but distance is deceptive in the mountains. Mario said it was half a mile away. He was studying the house with a fixed catlike expression. Between his strong white teeth, he said: "*Finanzi*."

The border guards! Something turned upside down in my diaphragm. It came home to me suddenly that we were not alone on this silent mountain slope and that we should not be there. It also struck me that I was on a foolish junket. My thoughts raced: What was a

mountain jail like? Would they pay any attention to an American passport? Do they shoot first? Mario waved me on.

Now I was cautious. I tried not to snap twigs underfoot; I imagined the woods a-crawl with vigilant watchers and started every time some unseen cow tinkled her bell. I was being so artfully wary that I didn't see Mario flop down behind a rock; I heard a loud snort from the road, which we had again approached and, groveling behind some bushes, saw that two loaded donkeys and their driver had come abreast and had stopped. The donkeys had smelled man.

"Who's there?" the driver said sharply. I dug my nose in the moss and tried to squirm down in the thin furze I lay in. One of the donkeys nickered and the man called out again, "Who's there?" and thrust a goad into the bushes between us. I didn't know whether to speak up or play dead. A man feels like a fool lying doggo in full view of his pursuer and I didn't know whether the fellow could see me or not. I had no doubt he was an armed guard and I waited, as time suspended, for a whack on the head or a bullet in the back.

Then, suddenly, the donkeys moved along and I could hear the driver abusing them up the road. I rose and went after Mario, who had scuttled off at an angle to the road. When I caught up with him, I tried

to explain I had not heard the donkeys. He laughed in my face with pure enjoyment. I hated him for it.

WE CLIMBED another hour, without speaking. I could feel, at the end of it, that we were getting near the top — the air had thinned and sky showed between the trees ahead. Mario stopped and stretched full length. "*Stanco?*" he asked me.

"And how!" I said, still gasping for breath. "I'm not used to this."

"It's all right now," he said. "We're nearly there. There's a hundred-yard open field up ahead. I go first. If it's all clear, I wave. You follow — and run!"

He got up and, half squatting, zig-zagged ahead from boulder to boulder. He ran into the open field and, halfway across, turned and beckoned. I picked up my coat jacket and sprinted after him — a hundred-yard dash over uneven, uphill ground. At the end of it was a wire fence; I vaulted it and landed beside Mario. "*Switzerland,*" he said.

I was about to collapse on the ground with exhaustion and relief but he said "*Avanti*" and slithered off down the steep slope on the other side of the fence. Part way down, he paused in a thicket while we caught our breath. Looking back at the opening where we had hopped the fence, I saw the silhouette of an Italian patrolman in profile, framed in the trees. I nudged

Mario and pointed; he glanced briefly at the guard and spat.

Down the mountain, we could see two small figures running. Mario was straining his eyes to make them out; he said he thought they might be herders but I was doubtful, especially when I saw them dive into a wood directly below us through which we would have to pass. But, though he seemed uncertain about the pair, Mario went ahead anyway and ten minutes later we came upon them in the wood, sitting quietly in our path. I ducked but Mario went up and shook hands with the men, who were bareheaded and unshaven. He had to call me out from hiding and I came forth sheepishly. "Friends," Mario said. The four of us then went on down the trail.

The new men — their names were Enrico and Gaetano — gave me puzzled side-glances at first until Mario told them I was an American — an American writer. Gaetano had the usual American cousin and he was full of questions, about our women and our wealth and whether a man could make a living in the United States. It seemed strange to be trying to visualize, between breaths, the city of New York for these outlaws as we four stumbled down that mountainside; New York, at that moment, was very far away. "Next year, maybe, I go to America," Mario said.

"To do some business in New York?" I asked him.

"No," he said, laughing. "Maybe I buy a Buick and look around the country."

We approached the first farmhouse—in a tiny place—quite openly; apparently there were more friends here. Mario led us through the barnyard and around the house; as we turned the corner we came smack up against a blond, slender young man in forest-green uniform, complete with holstered pistol and binoculars, standing astride our path—obviously one of the Swiss police. I gaped and stepped back a pace but the young man made no move. He was smoking a cheroot and without taking it from between his teeth said in badly accented Italian: "*Buon giorno, signori.*" He squinted at Mario. "Ah, you," he said. "Back again, eh?"

If the policeman wanted to take us in there was no help for it, for we were trapped and unarmed. I took my cue from my three companions, who seemed unalarmed. The Swiss noted our names and made polite inquiry as to what I was doing with the trio; he evidently thought I was an apprentice, for he said cheerfully to me, "You'll find smuggling a tough life." But he made no fuss. "See that you're out of Swiss territory by nightfall," he said, finally, to Mario, who nodded, and then he waved us on our way. "*Ciao, tenente,*" Mario said, tactfully promoting him a rank or two.

I thought this a pretty mysterious performance all around 'til I remembered something my friend had told me that night in the café—that some Swiss officials were excellent partners in the clandestine cigarette traffic; they permitted Italian gangs to enter an agreed-upon no-man's land inside Switzerland and to load export cigarettes checked by Swiss customs officers and then delivered at the smugglers' base. The condition was the smugglers' prompt return to Italy. I supposed any payoff or ice would have been taken care of at the source. Certainly I had seen no money change hands but there was a sharp smell of larceny in the air.

OUR TRAIL down, through heavily forested country in contrast to the cleared and cultivated Italian side of the mountain, paralleled the border. As we hurried along, dropping ever deeper into the valley, we heard loud and spurious-sounding bird calls in the woods; I asked Mario about them. They were signals, he said, passed from one Swiss guard post to another along our route for the purpose of checking on us and making sure we stayed within the stipulated no-man's land.

Through a clearing in the forest, I could see a farm nestled in a gulley near the valley road. Mario, pointing to it, told me that was our destination. The house and barns were in bad repair and looked deserted



and mean began to have misgivings about Mario as a big operator. Fifteen indeed! I saw none. A suspicion that we four were to make up Mario's band that night became strong. But I was in for a surprise.

We came to the farm, passed around the house and walked into the walled inner yard; there, sprawled over the ground were dozens of men, nearly all of them eating. They were a savage-looking lot, most of them; many had several days' growth of beard on their faces, their eyes were bloodshot and their clothes dirty and shapeless. There was a pause as we filed into camp and an ugly silence; some of the men stood up and I saw two or three reach for their knives. When they recognized Mario, then the other two behind him, they shouted hoarse greetings and went back to tearing chunks off their big wheels of bread, which they were eating with golf balls of hard goat cheese. I brought up the rear of our little group and somehow got separated from Mario and my two companions of the afternoon so that, to several of the smugglers around the entrance, I appeared as an interloper. These fellows advanced on me looking very dangerous. My Italian failed me almost completely and I was reduced to holding up my hands and feebly saying "*Buon giorno, buon giorno.*" Mario suddenly turned and saw my predicament.

"Leave him alone," he shouted.

"He's my friend. Go eat."

A few minutes afterwards I sat on the ground beside Mario, who had brought bread and cheese, some canned meat and two cups of dusty red wine from the farmhouse. The food restored my faith in Mario. So it was true; he *did* have an army; he *was* boss. I lay in the warm sun, relaxed and belching happily.

After the grinding strain of the morning the activity of the courtyard seemed like suspended animation. The men lay about joking and talking in low tones; some slept, others wandered off and brought back cut saplings, finger-thick, and piled them up to one side. Still others squatted in the shade and fashioned clumsy-looking slippers from swatches of old burlap bags. I was to discover what these preparations were for, and their importance, later.

I tried to talk with some of the men but most of them were reserved and some were hostile. They may have been voluble elsewhere but in this particular place you got the feeling that these were very serious men; their laughter was short and sharp and many of them just smoked moodily in silence. They varied in age from boys in their teens to gray-haired men in their fifties, yet their shabby, nondescript clothes and a common fierceness of expression gave a look of sameness to the group. It looked like any collection of forty-odd men you might see in a



newsreel of a street-riot in any depressed town of southern Europe. Many, as I discovered, were of the artisan class, dispossessed by the fortunes of the peace and become jacks of all trades, of which smuggling was one.

Guilio, a lad of twenty, was something of an exception. Dressed in stained gray flannels and an open-at-the-neck shirt, he seemed less proletarian and not at all peasant. He was also more friendly; he studied at the university in Milan, he told me, and smuggled in the summer to earn tuition money.

"I tell my family I am hauling timber, not tobacco leaf," he said, flexing a brown arm. "They see I get healthy in the mountains. They see I get strong." He laughed. "They see I come home with money, too. Mario pays me five-thousand lire a run." That, I found, was the standard wage for the porters. The *capos*, or squad leaders, got more.

I asked him, casually, if he smuggled other things and he looked at me sharply. "No narcotics," he said. "Mario — I always work for him — he won't deal in drugs. Too dangerous. And then the police, you know, they aren't so easy with the narcotics smugglers." I wondered. I knew that there was a constant demand for narcotics, chiefly cocaine, among the gilded decadents of post-war Rome, where some novel and exotic variations on drug-taking had been thought up. The tempta-

tion to slip a consignment of drugs in with the tobacco must be a powerful one. Apparently, however, it was a topic one did not pursue with these men.

I talked with a few others — a bricklayer named Angelo, with short-cropped black hair and a saintly face, and a ruddy-complexioned ex-carpenter named Guido. Angelo was not a happy smuggler.

"Most of the men don't run the border because they like it," he said. "Oh, some do but they're the pros from Buzano; they're either team captains or they run whole gangs. The rest of us drift into the racket because we can't get work at our regular trades. Before the war I worked on construction projects in Yugoslavia and in France" — he broke into French to prove it — "but now, no work anywhere. I started as a porter but I'm a *capo* now, with eight guys under me, and I get seven thousand lire a trip. I'm the only non-professional team captain." He added, wistfully: "Still, I'd rather be laying bricks."

I asked Angelo if he got scared in the mountains. He said that, sure, the men are scared of the *finanzi* but they did not expect to be caught — "with Mario, you don't worry. He knows his way." He also said that some of the men had found a young Swiss farm-hand lurking around camp earlier in the day and had chased him away. "A spy for the police, I'll bet," Angelo said

moodily. He was not worried and he was a little worried at the same time. So was I.

The ex-carpenter was different. He had started smuggling during the war and now he was a full-time border runner and he liked the life. "It pays better than my old job at the sawmill," he said. He was one of the men sewing the burlap slippers. I asked him what they were for and he explained that with these things tied over his own shoes a man never slipped on the trail — you could climb a dew-soaked rock almost straight up, he said. Then, when the trip was over you chucked the slippers away in the woods.

WHILE I WAS chatting with Guido a truck pulled up on the road above the farm and the driver came down into camp. The men obviously had seen him before and a few hailed him by name. He had a brief colloquy with Mario, ending in a mutual "*d'accordo*" and returned to the truck. Several of the smugglers clustered around an aerial wire I hadn't noticed before which terminated on a tree near the house. After a shout from the road, the first rectangular bale of cigarettes, slung on a wooden crotch, swayed crazily down along the wire and slammed to a stop against an old auto-tire nailed to the tree. One after another the big burlap bales came down — ten bales in ten minutes. I speculated on the number of

bales that had been delivered here before; there was no way of guessing, but the aerial wire installation suggested that the underground traffic was considerable. Mario's was not the only gang that used the farm. Other groups used it every day; different faces, different leaders, but always the bales of cigarettes. Amidst sylvan surroundings two miles above the nearest Swiss town, the smugglers carried on big business.

That afternoon I saw trucks from four different companies deliver their loads. Mario's contact men had earlier visited Swiss cigarette companies, bought and paid for the tobacco and had it delivered in bales, ready to lug away. Each sack stood shoulder high and weighed one hundred pounds, and each had a serial number inked on it, and contained 25,000 untaxed Swiss "export" cigarettes. Since Mario bought them wholesale and paid neither duty nor taxes of any sort, his profit margin was wide and clear. Once the loads were trekked over the border and stashed away in hiding-places on the Italian side, other agents took the tobacco off his hands. The cigarettes would be sold one week later in all the cities of Italy. Weeks later some of these cigarettes might turn up in the Balkan countries for black market sale. You find unstamped Swiss cigarettes in strange places and how they get there few people know. This was how.

Once the baled cigarettes arrived, activity began. Mario assigned one sack to each man. The porter then dragged his bale aside and selected saplings from the pile to make a carrying harness. He twisted two saplings together and interlocked them to make a girth pulled taut around the midriff of the bale. Two other sapling loops were attached up and down to serve as shoulder straps. Ten minutes' expert work and an experienced smuggler had readied his bale for the climb. The harness cost nothing to make and would be discarded afterward. It was symbolic of this whole smuggling operation—a big job that did not leave a trace. Veterans inspected the harnesses of new men and the packs were stacked one against the other against the farmhouse wall. Then everyone smoked. I noticed that with thousands of cigarettes piled all around us, half the border runners rolled their own.

While the men sat placidly waiting, Mario checked accounts with the farmer who ran the smuggling base—a sallow, unkempt individual who rented his establishment by the day and supplied the hard round breads, the wine, and the goat cheese. Mario paid for everything before his caravan set off. Mario's bookkeeping took an hour, for some reason, and it was at the end of this palaver that the torn five-lira notes that I'd seen in the

car came into play. Mario gave the farmer five of them, which the farmer would match with five other halves given him by Mario's Swiss agents when they had bought the cigarettes. Later the farmer would take the matched halves to the contact man and be paid for his services.

The men were ready. They had prepared their shoes and their packs, napped, and were anxious to start. Guido made jokes. "You'll see tonight. Italian *finanzi*. Tac-tac-tac-tac." He swung an imaginary machine gun from his hip for a few laughs and said "*Basta*" again and again—enough, enough—because the time for outwitting the frontier guards was coming close. Finally Mario yelled "*Andiamo*" and the men gave a cheer. They picked up alpenstocks and filed off ten yards apart in groups behind their team leaders. Burlap-shod, streaked sweat-rags tied round their foreheads, string nets of black bread and sour cheese hung round their necks, the loaded carriers looked from behind like robots without heads, or Egyptian slaves. Their bales towered over them.

Mario checked each man and the number stenciled on his sack. Eventually he and I were alone and he handed me a pair of burlap slippers and showed me how to tie them on. It was six-thirty when we left. The sullen farmer in the littered yard watched us go but did not bother to wave.

THE ROUTE back was much the same as the one we had come down by that morning. All the fifty men were laden except for me; even Mario carried a rucksack stuffed with cigarettes. The pack train climbed for twenty minutes, then a halt would be called for a short rest. The men lay down on the pine needles, their packs against the slope, but they did not slip out of their harnesses. After they had caught their breaths, they griped; some of them were sure that we had been seen by a guard after we had passed close to an Italian customs post near the border. Near the top of the mountain we saw the young Swiss Angelo had told me about who had been run out of camp earlier in the day. The men threw rocks at him and the pessimists among them were sure he had already been up to the *finanzi* headquarters to squeal.

The toiling uphill was hot work. One porter kept complaining that he shouldn't be here at all; it was the name-day of his village patron saint, but "*Madonna mia*, my kids have got to eat." Some of the men glanced darkly at me now and then and whispered among themselves the way the sailors must have done with Jonah. I felt very alone and stuck close to Angelo and Guido. Mario was constantly moving up and down the column, reassuring, condoling, and exhorting the men. He was general, chaplain, morale builder all in one.

The preliminary climb was finished by eight in the evening, with an uphill mile still to hike. It wasn't dark, and to add to our troubles a breathless messenger brought bad news. The lead team of porters had been forced to stop below the frontier because twenty Italian customs guards were reported on the prowl. This news caused fresh consternation. Mario and I loped off to join the first group clustered by a shepherd's hut. "I chased my animals right up to the fence," the herder told us. "Lots of *finanzi* are roaming up there. I'd wait till dark to continue the climb, if I were you." Mario quizzed the shepherd and then passed word down the mountain to all teams to halt. He and I went inside the herder's house to wait. Two elderly women gave up their chairs by the crackling fire. They brought us welcome bowls of hot milk. Several smugglers who came in sagged to sleep on the floor.

The blue sky took forever turning gray and a while longer to chill to the color of blued shotgun steel before we could set out again. When it was dark enough to suit him, Mario gave the word. A stir crept through the farm outbuildings where the men had been huddled half-chilled, half-asleep. Before long, the army was again on the move, treading a well-marked path at the head of the valley below the saddle pass. Somewhere behind us, dogs barked, the echoes, I thought, must have alerted

the *finanzi*.

By ten o'clock the smuggler teams had linked forces and were fifteen minutes below the frontier ridge. We had reached the front lines. Again mysterious whispers from those in the van slowed our advance: *finanzi* were still abroad. On orders, the column separated to both sides of the dry, boulder-strewn torrent bed that was our path. The men sought a convenient gully or a clear spot to curl up beside their packs. I tried to find a spot to stretch out, finally settled for a cramped space behind a boulder which kept me from slipping. The mountain slope was steep. The night air penetrated our sweat-sodden clothes.

We lay on that slope for four hours; the only sounds were snores and brutish grunts from the porters as they slept, giving me the odd illusion that I was the only human in an encampment of sleeping pack animals. Not until two in the morning did we get word that the coast was clear. The men came to life, groaning and silently beating their arms and stamping their feet to get the blood flowing. In a few minutes we began to struggle up the cliff. A smuggler near me started to whistle to cheer himself; his neighbor clapped a hand over his mouth, saying fiercely: "No noise, idiot! We're too close to the border." Every time a stone rattled downhill behind us, fifty men stopped breathing.

The final spurt was the worst. Even carrying nothing, as I was, and in broad moonlight, I misstepped several times. The laden porters, however, could not afford one faux pas. This is an odd kind of crime, I thought; crime, I had always supposed, was an evasion of work, but this bore a strong resemblance to heavy labor under conditions no union in the world would allow.

Finally we reached the ridge and stood there, panting and sweating. "*Il confine*," the man ahead of me whispered. The frontier! I was too rushed to care.

The border narrowed to a ledge two feet wide; on our left a sheer cliff dropped into the valley and a jagged wall of rock hemmed us in on our right. We were skirting one side of that saddle pass Mario had shown me through the thicket that morning, which meant the guards' barracks must be hard by. Three scouts had come up from the Italian side to meet us. They urged the men forward. "*Sforzo!*" they hissed to the porters. "Courage. Put your backs into it, boys!" The boys had no need for advice, for now we could see the guard house, washed in silver moonlight and, lying below us in the saddle, much too near.

THE VALLEY had a cold beauty and lay still. Then, without warning, the silence was split by three shots. Lights went on one after another in the barracks below

us, then more shots, ricocheting, and echoing in the mountains.

"*Cristo!* They see us!" someone said. We all broke into a run; more shots rang out and I thought I heard them whining around me. More lights went on to illumine the nightmare.

Working up the hill, it had taken the caravan ten minutes to pass a given point but we were over the ridge that marked the border in less than two. By the time the guards had piled out of bed and dressed we were gone in the night. No man had been hit and none broke file.

Racing down the Italian side, the scouts worried at us like sheep dogs. They cursed the carriers who stopped to gasp for air and, in turn, the carriers cursed their mothers' milk, the *finanzi*, all the saints and especially the government — it was all *de Gasperi's* doing. Crashing through woods and thickets and running along the edges of pastures, the quarter-mile column of men sped downward as though their packs held nothing heavier than balsa wood.

It began to grow light, another cause for alarm. We had crossed the frontier at 2:30 A.M. and the sun would rise at four. Mario had said the trip had to be finished by daylight, or it was our necks. With only one short rest, we plunged down that mountainside in an hour and a half and at 3:45 we were running through the fields of wild flowers

above the village from which Mario and I had started out the day before. The porters still had a piece to go but for Mario and me this was the end of the line.

I stood beside him as he watched the smugglers go past us and out of sight. A farm woman came up the path, carrying feed to her goats and chickens, and greeted Mario just as the last porter vanished around a bend.

"*Buon giorno,*" she said, as though meeting him there at four in the morning was nothing out of the way. "I heard the shooting up above. I'm glad you're safe. They say the *finanzi* got another gang."

Mario seemed only vaguely interested.

"*Peccato,*" he said. He stooped to unlace his burlap overshoes. "Take yours off," he told me; when I had handed them to him, he tossed both pairs into a gully. "If the guards catch you with those they don't ask questions. They throw you in jail until you talk." He patted his tan and white sport shoes. "These are better," he said and, for the first time that night, he smiled.

"We had a close call tonight, didn't we?" I said. He shrugged and took out his pocket comb. "That's what I pay the men for. One thousand lire for twelve hours pack-carrying. Four thousand not to be afraid on top."

We tucked in our sweat-stained shirts and put our jackets on and at

4:30 strolled nonchalantly into the inn-yard where we had left the car.

The proprietress of the inn, our friend of the day before — although it didn't seem like the day before — served us bread and strong coffee. Almost instantly after the meal I was assailed by sleep and once, through heavy-lidded eyes, I caught Mario looking at me with a half-sardonic expression. He was tired too, but I had a feeling he could make another trip over the border and back after ten minutes rest.

WE PAID THE BILL and said goodbye to the innkeeper. Mario gave her a pack of the smuggled cigarettes, and we got in the car. As we drove along, Mario gave me the same instructions as before: "If they stop us, you don't know me. You saw me walking along the road and picked me up." As he was talking a green jeep came around a curve ahead and passed us; an officer and four men with tommy guns were inside. Mario muttered "*finanzi*" as they passed and kept his head a little averted. Then with a short

laugh, he said: "*Ma come sempre troppo tardi.*" He watched them until they took the curve behind us. "Better I get off now. If I'm alone they won't make trouble. Here." Heslid out before I'd brought the car to a stop.

"Well, look," I began. "I want to thank you . . ."

"*Niente,*" Mario said, waving two fingers before his face. "I gave you my word you'd make the trip. Cigarettes this time — maybe next time something else. Last week we took some Czech refugees. Sent them on from here. Sent a man to Hungary three weeks ago; he's arrived okay. If you want to, we go there together. You would like Budapest. You won't need money or papers. You'll see what I can do." He swelled his barrel chest out proudly.

He stepped away from the car onto the steep edge of the road. In the rear-view mirror I could see him walking along, as I drove on, picking at a tooth and looking like a small business man who had just made a successful deal in eggs. That is the last I saw of Mario.



A STORY

## JOSÉ SCHENCK, REVERSE THE CHARGES

BERNARD WOLFE

I REMEMBER, I was standing in a bar and after a while I reached for my wallet to pay for the limonada con tequila, then I decided to count my money. It came to forty-one pesos; in those days that was only eleven dollars and change. I left the cervezería and went up the street to the little park in the center of town, the Alameda, where I sat down on an empty bench near the Palacio de Belles Artes. For about a half hour I looked at the Americans with the Leicas slung over their shoulders and the silk gabardines and the Panamas, and my nerve came back. For an American who is stranded in

some foreign town it is a good idea to sit down in a sunny place and watch other Americans walk up and down. Americans never starve, that's the thing, it's written all over their faces. When your folding money is about gone it is very reassuring to study them and think of this and remind yourself that you are one of them, not a plain ordinary bum like most of the local citizens.

Then something caught my eye: a man was maneuvering his way along the footpath in jerks and improbable spasms, as though he was riding a runaway pogo stick. He was dressed like a lion tamer, riding britches,

