

## *Summer Storm*

THE SUN had not yet reached the bathing-hut on the landing-stage at the foot of the hills. Great trees overshadowed it. The river gleamed smoothly, whitened by the dawn, and on the far bank houses in scattered suburbs began to show lights. Over there it seemed broad daylight already. The old boat-woman, earthy and with dishevelled hair, was going along the line of punts moored to the landing steps, pulling them in, one by one, then bending forward with her left hand on her hip to haul in the slack ropes. Every time a boat wedged itself between those on either side of it, the bump was passed along the whole line, setting them all rocking in the current.

A curtain of sacking hung across the back of the hut and from behind it came sounds of movements and voices. Somebody was getting undressed.

"Look at this silk blouse! Is it yours?" a harsh voice cried. "And these silk stockings?"

The old woman looked up crossly, stopping her work. The reflection from a few pink clouds above the trees shone on the river and cast a glow over her face.

"Here's a skirt, too," the voice went on. "Lovely quality! And another one."

The curtain was pulled aside and a young fellow came out, buttoning the shoulder of his swimming costume. He was short and not very muscular, but sunburnt and curly haired.

"And we meant to be first, this time! Gosh! It's cold, here," he said, slapping his thighs, all pimply with goose-flesh, and

jumping up and down. "We talked about making it a foursome if we could get a couple of girls out of bed this early and take them boating."

"There's a couple of girls ahead of you, all by themselves," the old woman told him, bending to her work again. "Alone and full of beans. Since no one was here to see them they didn't mind waking people up before it was light. They didn't even give me time to comb my hair. Women!"

"Alone!" the young fellow cried as he jumped about. "D'you hear that, Moro? Two girls on their own ahead of us! Come on out of there!" He turned and asked the old woman: "What are they like? What sort are they?"

"Haven't you just seen their clothes?" she answered with a grin. "From a woman's underwear to her skin is no great distance."

"That's nothing to go by. Who are they?"

"They aren't regular customers. One is thin, straw-coloured. The other hadn't much to say but she's already tanned dark brown by the sun, well-built and so full of energy that she almost overturned the boat when she jumped in. Both of them were very stuck-up and stand-offish."

"Have they been gone long?"

"An hour or so."

"Pretty girls? What colour bathing costumes?"

"Ask her if they took their handbags with them, Aurelio," the first voice called sharply from behind the curtain.

"That friend of yours sounds a bright lad," the old woman chuckled with a wink.

Raising her voice she added: "Don't worry. They're the sort to pay for their own boat. They look as if they're worth much more than that."

"Depends who they come across," and the second man emerged from behind the curtain, a tall, bony fellow with great sweaty feet and red hands, fastening his baggy swim-suit over his shoulders as pale as the belly of a fish. He looked straight at the old woman, whose face still twinkled with mischief, and a flash of ill-temper gleamed in his eyes.

She looked him up and down stealthily and remarked: "So we're new here, are we? Never been out in a boat all this year, from what I can see."

Aurelio broke in: "He looks a lot better when he's holding an oar. Then he'd beat all those family men you've tipped into the Po. Any oar! Even a bit of wood!"

"Yet I've never seen him rowing past here. By the look of him, I'd say the poor soul was at his last gasp after three months of sciatica. Glad to get a bit of fresh air again, eh?"

The young man screwed up his mouth and spat on the ground. Without turning round he asked his companion, out of the corner of his mouth, "Got anything?"

Aurelio slipped behind the curtain and brought out a small case that he put into the first punt. Then he jumped aboard and stood with his legs wide apart, rocking the little boat to work it free of the others and creating tumultuous repercussions all along the line.

"It's quite ready," the old woman cried, bringing along an iron-bound pole and a paddle. "I baled out just now, after those other two got me out of bed. All you've got to do is get in," and with a powerful sweep of her arm she swung out the heavy pole.

"Let's hope so," Aurelio replied.

The old woman turned with a grin to Moro, who was standing there doing nothing, and eyed him again, curiously, from head to foot. To Aurelio she said, "Your friend still looks bleary-eyed. Watch out! If you run into a bridge there'll be damages to pay."

"You be careful nobody runs into you," Moro retorted. Clumsily he climbed into the boat, making Aurelio nearly lose his balance. "Hand over that paddle," he said coldly as he turned round, "and cast off."

THE OLD WOMAN did as he told her. Aurelio looked up at the sky. By now the pink clouds had gone. Standing in the stern, Aurelio thrust the pole straight down and forced the boat out with all the power of his wrists from among the others until it swung free as the current caught it. "Good-bye," the old woman muttered, but neither man made any reply and she went back to the bathing-hut.

Aurelio, in his black swim-suit, kept raising and lowering the pole, probing the bottom, bending forward to exert his utmost strength against the pressure of the water. He looked steadily ahead at the smooth, shining stream, screwing up his eyes against the glare. He came out into the sunlight.

Moro was lying in the bottom of the boat, filling it completely, his hairy legs dangling over the sides. He raised his hand to shade his eyes.

"Isn't the sunshine grand, Moro?"

"It's grand to see it from here," Moro muttered under his breath.

"It's the same everywhere," Aurelio replied. "But it won't be so bright for long, this morning. Look at those clouds coming up."

"The worst of it is, when you're inside, all the sun does is heat your cell. It's not just sunshine, it's a blazing furnace."

"Then in winter it keeps you warm."

"In winter you freeze and you can't say a thing. But the maddening part is that in summer, when there's a sun like this, you've got to stick it out in coat and trousers. Take your coat off? No, sir, not on your life! Take off your jacket when they let you out in the exercise yard? You can't. Why not? You just can't."

"It's the same for soldiers, anyway."

"Worse. They shut a man up just so as to make him walk round the dustbins."

Aurelio, bending forward to thrust in

the pole, laughed down into Moro's face. Moro, raising his hand and screwing up his eyes, grinned back at him.

Covering his eyes again, Moro went on: "Once a man's in prison it means he's a bad lot. Nobody wants rotters like us. They tell us we must change our way of life and meantime they keep us shut up like rabbits. If we're to change our way of living they should let us get on with it, turn us loose at once. Instead, no. You've got to stay there two, three, ten years, depending on what your record says; turn yellow, green, grey—that's the only change in life you'll get. D'you know that where I was there was a man serving twenty years? He looked like my grandfather did when he was dead, yet he was only forty. Murder. All because he'd had a drop too much."

"Still, some fools let themselves be caught when they shouldn't," said Aurelio as he bent forward again.

Moro started up to sit facing Aurelio. "But what if justice is worse than we are?" he exclaimed. "Why don't they kill a man straight away if they catch him at it? Or, if he was just picking a pocket, give him a sound thrashing, like men? Then we'd soon see who had the best of it. It's a priest's trick to keep a man shut up for years. Don't you agree?"

"But all they gave you was a year and a half."

"A year's nothing. It's the days that are so long."

"You used to be brighter than that, Moro. You haven't got the prison food out of your system, yet. It's upset your stomach and you look scared stiff."

Moro fumbled in the little attaché-case and brought out a cigarette. The pale little flame in the sunshine showed up the hollows in his drawn cheeks. He tossed the match away.

Aurelio said: "What you should be doing is learning a bit more sense. Be careful where you operate another time. Who ever heard of a stick-up in broad daylight? You're no good at that sort of job, anyway."

"I'm all right in a boat, though," Moro exclaimed, jumping to his feet so suddenly that Aurelio almost overbalanced. "Give me that pole."

Cautiously Aurelio edged over to Moro's side and passed him the pole. Then he sat down and tried to smoke. Moro, his cigarette twisted between his lips, felt for the bottom and made his first thrust, then slowly straightened up.

**B**IANCA raised her dripping paddle and the punt glided forward under the trees into the still water. "The sunshine's gone," Clara grumbled.

Bianca, clenching her teeth, threw herself down on the bank and looked around. "It's that cloud making the water seem dark," she said. "If the sun comes out again it will be all silvery."

"Is it going to rain?"

"I don't think so, but even if it does, we're here to go swimming."

"You're a real river-girl," Clara murmured, and Bianca looked away, determined not to lose her temper at the lazy mockery in her friend's eyes.

Clara remarked: "Why ever didn't you notice how low the swallows are flying over the Po?"

Bianca swung round to look at the river. Through the little opening where they had come in she could see the current running swiftly past in a belt of sunlight. Out in mid-stream a dredger was floating, moored to a slanting cable and rocking as the water rippled round it. It was quite deserted.

"That's where we can go if it rains. I've never been on board a dredger."

"There isn't a soul about," Clara said. "Once those poor sand-grubbers have gone home—and seeing they spend their life on the water they could at least wash themselves—the river is a desert. Anyone could die—or be born—here and nobody would know. It's like some bygone civilisation." She leaned over the side of the boat and added: "Except for all those sardine tins and broken jars. They strike a different

note. Actually I don't think much of your river."

Clara's supple body in its tight-fitting yellow bathing costume threw back a pale reflection as she leaned over the greenish water. Bianca watched her unwillingly, making no reply. But then she smiled. Clara was gazing at her own face in the water and rubbing the corner of her eye with one finger. "So any mirror's enough to put the fair lady Clara in a better frame of mind," Bianca mocked, conscious that her voice was shaking uncontrollably.

"Taking one mirror with another, I prefer my own. At least in that one I don't see a shoal of little fish shooting out of my mouth, and it doesn't make me look drunk. Nor does it give me a halo from a sunken bowl."

Involuntarily, Bianca's fists clenched, but she controlled herself, stretching out her arms and relaxing her cramped fingers. At ease again, she turned her head, letting her eyes wander over the sky and the trees on the bank. Beyond their trunks stretched a pleasant beach, shining against a mass of cloud. "I didn't promise you the River Amazon," she said good-humouredly, "but that's what we'll get if it rains. Why take shelter, anyway. What can be lovelier than a morning storm?"

"Listen, dear, if you want to have a swim, get on with it. It's going to pour any minute and my costume isn't meant to get wet."

"I want to see you get in."

"Bianca! Is that why you've brought me all up here? For me to jump into that black water and get covered with filthy mud and bitten by crocodiles? Bianca! I have the sort of pretty skin that needs looking after. It's a good thing that sun of yours has been kind and respectful to a poor blonde without much on."

"Stupid," Bianca replied with a shrug. "This life would do you good, make you stronger and more confident."

"But I'm strong already. Too strong and self-reliant. What I need is the opposite. It's cost me one love affair, being so strong."

Bianca bent down to undo her canvas shoes, looking sideways at Clara and listen-

ing as she went on: "It never does to show people you're strong and self-reliant. They're only too ready to knock it out of you."

"Why don't you give up this aimless way of life?" Bianca asked with a smile.

"It isn't as dull as some, you know."

"I see," Bianca murmured softly, feeling in her bag for her bathing-cap.

When she stood ready she turned to Clara, who lay at full length in the bottom of the boat grinning up at her. "So you really aren't coming?" she asked.

"You go, and come back in triumph. I'll give you a cheer."

"Won't you at least swim in here? I'll hold you up."

"My precious, you're too silly for words. One does that sort of thing with men. Off you go, and don't break your neck."

B IANCA shivered as she entered the water, and waded with uncertain steps towards the opening. Then she clenched her teeth and dived. The water was not cold. Over there in mid-stream the dredger was twinkling in the sun. She stood up again with the water up to her waist, and felt the wind cold on her shoulders.

She passed the ripples swirling by the opening and saw the current running strongly ahead. The bottom was deeper now. She glanced over her shoulder at the surface of the water, the low banks, the boat, the vague blur of the trees, then stretched herself in a powerful swimming stroke. Suddenly she was out into the tumbling current. She turned up-stream from the dredger, swimming straight towards the hill now veiled by the sun and clouds and plunging her face into the dark gurgling water, catching her breath as best she could in the pauses between her arm strokes. Her progress across the current threatened to break her rhythm at any moment and she could see nothing but flashing drops of spray. Exhausted by her efforts to breathe she dropped her head for the last time and suddenly saw the water below the surface made transparent by diffused sunlight. She raised her head. The dredger was only a few yards away.

Bianca worked her way around the rocking hull, looking for somewhere to hold on. A shadow ran across the water. The last of the sunshine had gone. The chill wind blew stronger.

Bianca pulled herself up, scraping her knee on the vessel's side. The metal superstructure with its pulleys and sand-encrusted gratings took up most of the space, leaving only a narrow ledge all round. Unsteadily she made her way along it and came to a hut of rough boards tucked in among the machinery. It had an earthy floor and a pile of folded sacks in one corner. In the middle, the deck was cut away, leaving an empty space of bubbling black water—the river itself. A chain of buckets hung down into it from an opening dimly visible in the roof high above.

Bianca went outside again to watch the current rushing out from below the hull, and her eyes opened wide in amazement at the flood pouring down towards the weir, broken by stones and torn branches. She reflected that only an hour earlier they had been punting on the river, and she remembered Clara.

She ran to the side of the dredger and looked for the break in the woods where they had landed. At first she saw nothing but the low, green bank, distant and motionless under the swaying trees. Then, behind a spit of land, she caught sight of Clara's yellow costume. She was standing waving the paddle, shouting shrilly and pointing at the sky.

"There's shelter here," Bianca yelled. "It's safe enough."

Apparently Clara heard, for she waved her hand and disappeared behind the little promontory. The first thunder rumbled in the distance. Nervously, Bianca whipped off her rubber cap. Terrifying clouds were piling up, a sudden bright flash of lightning darted across the sky. Bianca pressed her hands on the hull and stared down at the water swirling and foaming below her. The thunder did not come for a moment and she started shouting: "Clara, it's..."

There came a low roar that gradually

grew louder, echoing among the hills and swelling like the noise of a landslide until it crashed in the distance and died away with a dull reverberation. Bianca flushed as her fears left her. It was raining in the city, for certain. Down there in the valley the sky looked terrible.

"Clara, it's all right here. I'm coming to fetch you." Cold wind-squalls blowing up the river whistled round the dredger, making it swing on its mooring. "Where on earth has she got to, the silly girl!" Bianca muttered to herself, peering at the low bank and the tall trees swaying wildly against the clear streak of the horizon.

Then she saw the boat coming out of the opening with Clara in it, frenziedly straining with the paddle and raising great splashes of foam. But once out in the current she lost course, seized by the whirlpools and blown by the gusts of wind.

"Careful!" Bianca yelled. "You'll end up over the weir!" and she ran along the hull, watching the boat being swept inexorably downstream. Then Clara stood up. (The thought flashed into Bianca's mind that she looked just like a canary.) She seized the heavy, iron-bound pole and leaned forward to thrust it in over the stern. The punt swung further downstream. Clara was gripping the pole with all her might, holding it upright and trying to find the bottom. There was no bottom, and every time she tried to probe for it the current drove the punt hard against the pole, wrenching her wrists painfully. "Idiot!" Bianca howled, almost beside herself. "Go sideways! Put the pole down. Use the paddle!"

She was frantically pulling on her cap again when she heard a scream. Clara had disappeared. She had fallen into the water behind the punt. A patch of wild splashing in the wake of the boat showed where she was struggling.

Bianca dived in, at the same moment almost blinded by a lightning flash. Only in the water could she feel safe. She swam desperately, head down, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, not even the thunder clap. For the moment she was not thinking of



Clara. She was straining every nerve to reach the punt and salvage the pole. Then she could save Clara.

HER ARM BUMPED against the pole. Looking round, through the spray, she could see something yellow splashing about some distance away; in the other direction, in the grip of the current, she saw the empty punt. "Without the boat I'll never manage to pull her out" flashed through her mind, and pushing the pole ahead of her she made for the punt. She reached it and threw in the pole. Heaving herself over the side, out of the rushing water, almost tore her shoulders apart, but at last she rolled in, bruised all over, and seized the paddle. When she turned round there was no longer any sign of Clara. Only then did she notice it was raining in torrents, great blasts that cut furrows in the surface of the river. Clouds of fine spray like smoke billowed everywhere and her back began to tingle, stung by the violence of the downpour.

Clara was no longer there. Bianca tossed her head to free herself from the matted hair that was blinding her. She had lost her cap, and had to run her fingers through her hair before she could push it away. A wild yell burst from her: "Clara!"

All around her the water boiled, its surface unbroken. Steering the boat with the paddle and holding it steady against the current she peered into the swirling flood, trying to find the place where Clara had disappeared. Millions of tiny bubbles spread a layer of pale foam between the water and the air. Through the raindrops Bianca looked for the banks, but everything had vanished. All she could see was a vague outline. She was alone on the river.

Plying the paddle frenziedly she made some headway against the current, satisfied to stay afloat, heedless of her direction. Then, through the hair still hanging over her eyes, she noticed she was level with a certain tall tree growing on the bank. Her teeth chattering with excitement, she jumped to her feet in the drenching rain and put down the paddle. "She called me

'a river girl,'" she murmured breathlessly and plunged in, hurting her foot badly.

Under the surface she found a great calm. The dense mass of water deadened every sound, made every effort seem remote and pointless. She strained her eyes in the darkness and groped about with her hands, but she saw nothing and felt nothing except the weight of the water. When she surfaced she was surprised by the light and the rain. She had quite forgotten them. The punt was not far away. She turned and dived again, probing about until her ears were buzzing and her arm-strokes grew weak. She surfaced again and swam to the boat, clinging to it with her whole body and tearing her costume as she clambered in.

Ankle-deep in water, she picked up the paddle again and looked around her, uncertain what to do. Then her heart leapt. There in the mist was another boat with two men in it, creeping along the opposite bank and making straight for the dredger.

Bianca jumped to her feet and started shouting, waving the paddle. The warm rain splashed into her mouth. The men did not turn. "Over here!" she yelled, loud enough to split her throat. She almost added: "Help!", but refrained. Her bag was floating in the bottom of the punt. She pulled out a towel and waved it, still shouting.

The men were now level with the dredger and paddled round, looking up at it. As Bianca watched, one of them jumped aboard it and the other, bending forward in the rain, handed up a rope. She glanced at the foaming current as it swept past, loaded with mud, then, clenching her teeth, she turned the boat towards the dredger and paddled furiously.

OUT OF THE RAIN her half-drowned head came level with the hull. "Oh!" Aurelio was saying as he threw himself down on the sacks, "Look at the state we're in!" Moro, standing naked at the back of the hut, wringing out his swimming suit, did not turn.

"Here's a woman!" Aurelio exclaimed.

She clutched the rail with both hands and the little boat slid from under her feet. "A girl's been drowned," she cried shrilly. "Come and help me."

Aurelio ran forward to give her a hand. "If you don't come aboard, you'll be drowned, too," he cried. "Moro, come and help!"

The girl, her hand in Aurelio's, looked back and forth from him to the river. She was steaming like a horse; her sunburned skin looked sodden and lifeless; her arms and legs were covered with scratches.

"A friend of mine's been drowned," she cried. "I've got to find her. I've been calling for ages."

"Even the fishes would drown on a day like this," said Moro in the darkness of the hut, holding his suit to screen his hairy stomach.

"Jump in! Jump in!", Aurelio urged again. "You're over the worst. If it was all that time ago, she's dead by now. Where did it happen?"

"Down there," the girl sobbed, pointing to the current and trying to release her other hand. "Over there."

"She went under?"

"D'you expect people to drown in the air?" Moro sneered in the background.

"Jump in," said Aurelio. "Too much water is bad for anyone. There's a hut here. Your boat's waterlogged already."

Moro came forward with his costume draped around him. "Where does she say it happened?" he asked.

"Over there. Just beyond the Sangone." She turned her eyes in that direction and the drops fell from her matted hair like a flood of tears.

"Come on into shelter," Aurelio persisted, pulling her by the arm. "If that's where she went down, the current won't carry her beyond the weir. We know where to find her. Was she the same age as you?"

"Could she swim?" Moro added.

"Can you swim yourself?" the girl asked sharply.

Moro flung himself down on a seat at the edge of the hut, his costume between his

thighs. Aurelio was still bending over the side trying to pull the girl in, and Moro kicked him on the ankle. "Don't you see?" he said out of the corner of his mouth. "These are the girls from the landing stage. My dear bathing beauty," he went on, "we can swim a lot better than people like you who come here to act the fool when other folk are working, but we swim in water, not in rain. We'll see about that later, if you like. But for the present, we'll let it rain. Leave her to get out of it by herself."

Aurelio, uncertain what to do, relaxed his hold and went back into the hut, the water dripping from him. Slowly the boat drifted backwards. The girl stood there for a moment, raising her shoulder to rub her cheek. Then she leaned forward, picked up the paddle and brought the punt alongside the dredger again.

Without a word she pulled herself up on the hull, holding the boat's mooring chain between her teeth. Then she turned her back and crouched forward to thread the chain through a ring in the hull. As she did so, she found that her black costume was split all down the left side and torn at the hem on her thigh. Her white flesh gleamed through the holes, very different from the bronzed skin of her legs and shoulders.

Having secured the chain, she leaned forward to take her bag from the boat. Aurelio's eyes followed the play of her pale skin under her torn costume. Without looking at him, the girl staggered to her feet—she was short and dark, like him—and put down her sodden bag inside the hut. Then she sat down under shelter, apart from the other two, her knees against her chest. She rested her elbows on them and took her cheeks in her hands, sitting very still and staring at the rain.

The whole dredger was quivering and rocking as the current washed past it. Down from the opening in the roof of the hut where the pulley-chains ran came cold blasts that cut into their backs. Aurelio, crouching on his sacks, looked at Moro's long, bare spine and the girl's shoulders, shining against the background of the rain.

"Moro," he said suddenly, breaking the silence, "cover up your seat, or you'll catch a chill from this draught."

Moro grinned across at him. "It's not proper to put on one's trousers in the presence of a young lady."

"D'you think you're so handsome? Young ladies don't look."

"They're too well brought up to say anything."

Aurelio stuffed one hand into the little case lying on the sacks. "D'you want a cigarette?"

"If they're not drenched, too."

Aurelio stood up and held out the packet to Moro, taking one out with his lips at the same time. Then he turned to the girl and offered her one. "Let's have a smoke on it," he said. She made no response but still sat motionless, staring at the rain.

"Thanks very much, but I don't smoke," he prompted her as he went back to the sacks and struck a match.

"**Y**OU SEE what women are like," Moro told him, trying in vain to strike a match in his turn. "The whole world at their beck and call. Acting so foolhardy and running into danger when they haven't any idea what the Po can be like. When a man reasons with them they spit at his feet and ask him if he can swim. Somebody who can really swim doesn't let anyone drown. What'll you bet, Aurelio, that the other girl couldn't swim, either?"

Irritably, Aurelio threw away his cigarette and wandered restlessly round the hut, trying out the chain that held the buckets. He thrust his hand inside his costume to rub his shivering chest and finally came to sit beside the girl at the front of the hut. Moro was watching her out of the corner of his eye. Like her, Aurelio pulled his knees against his chest and rested his cheeks on his hands. "Pretty girls don't cry," he told her with a wink.

She flushed, jumped to her feet and turned to go inside, but Aurelio held her by the arm and tried to pull her back. Then he let her go. "All right, all right," he said.

"We know each other. At least I know your friend was a blonde."

The girl stared at him a moment with blazing eyes. "I told you myself," she muttered as she ran inside. Then she swung round in the gloom and asked him: "How did you manage to find out that?"

"I'll tell you, if you tell me your name," Aurelio smiled as he rose to his feet.

"It's Piccone," she answered quickly. "Well?"

Moro burst out laughing and slapped his thigh.

"Your own name," Aurelio persisted, still smiling. "What does your surname matter to me?"

She stood still a moment, disconcerted. Then her whole face flamed red and distorted, as if he had struck her across the mouth.

Suddenly an oath burst from Moro. He had jumped up hurriedly and his costume had fallen overboard. Dropping to his knees he stretched his arm down but failed to reach it. Then, naked as he was, he leapt into the girl's boat with a great splash and fished it out, dripping wet. He climbed up again, still uncovered. "Blast! It was practically dry," he exclaimed as he threw it down in a corner and stalked into the hut.

The girl watched him come, her eyes fixed on his face. Without glancing aside, he said, from the corner of his mouth: "Those boats are full of water. Go and bale them out, Aurelio." The girl backed away.

"Where have we seen the blonde, Miss Piccone?" Moro sneered, his face close to hers. "The dead float, you fool! They can swim much better than you or me. D'you know where that blonde is now?" Moro's voice sank to a chilling whisper. The girl could see his teeth. "She's here behind you, in this patch of water. Her eyes are open and her nails all broken. She's calling you, raising her hand. She's going to grab you!"

Terrified, the girl crouched down on the sacks. Moro laughed over her shoulders. "Silly fool," he said, gripping her sides with his hands.



Aurelio took him by the shoulder. "You can't do things like that, you great lout. You're only frightening her. D'you think you're still in prison? I was the one who helped her. It's my affair."

THE GIRL STRUGGLED to her knees. Moro thrust her down again with his fist on her neck and his knee in the small of her back. Suddenly he turned his tense, fleshless face to Aurelio and said with a grin, "Go and bale out those punts, I tell you. This Piccone girl has seen me; she's fallen for me; she wants me."

"You shouldn't have got stripped. It isn't fair."

"Sure," Moro retorted, swaying as the girl struggled beneath him. "I don't want any of your nonsense. Go and bale out the punts. They're sinking."

The girl collapsed on the sacks so suddenly that Moro almost fell on top of her. Her limp body in its torn black costume lay white and slack.

"You've killed her!" Aurelio cried.

"They're like cats. They squeal if you only hold them under water."

Out in the rain again, Aurelio stared at the current instead of seeing to the boats, watching it foaming, yellow with mud, under the water streaming from the sky. Eddies formed, swirled away and formed again round the dredger as it swung and rolled in the fierce grip of the flood, all its metal parts clanking noisily. Now and then a broken oar flashed past, glimpsed for an instant before it rolled under again. Over in the valley; everything looked vague and indistinct; the masses of trees on the deserted banks seemed in a different world. One could guess how the water must be roaring and foaming over the rapids by the weir.

Both punts were full. The one the girl had brought was half-submerged. Aurelio glanced sideways at the dripping entrance to the hut, then threw himself forward and picked up a short end of wood floating in the boat. Blinded by the rain, he leaned out from the hull and made a few aimless movements with it. Then he drew back again as

heavy breathing and a long, low groan reached him from the hut, and the sound of material being ripped. He looked round quickly and glimpsed in the gloom a pale, shapeless mass of struggling bodies.

He sat down again on the hull, stretching out his brown legs in the rain and staring at the punt as it rocked gently. The water inside it was clear, compared with the river, and the varnished bottom planking shone through. The iron-bound pole was still there. The paddle had been washed away.

He heard Moro cursing, but would not turn round. He heard sounds of a struggle and a long moan. Then, silence, except for the rain.

Aurelio unbuttoned his swim-suit at the shoulder and rolled it down to his waist. He examined his chest as he breathed in and out. The cold air tasted of mud and leaves. Then he tried to purse his lips and whistle a tune, but no sound came out.

"Aurelio! Quick!" Moro's hoarse voice broke the silence. "Here's another one dead!"

AURELIO sprang up. Moro was sitting at the back of the hut, clutching his knees against his chest. Aurelio barely had time to glimpse the girl lying at full length before she leapt to her feet, deathly white in spite of great black bruises, her costume in tatters. She fled across the dark space, pushed Aurelio aside and fell into the water.

Aurelio had knocked his knee against the planks but he recovered his balance and turned round as a roar of laughter from Moro made his ears ring.

"She's done it on you! See! That's women for you!"

The girl was already some way off, swimming spasmodically with great splashes, half out of the water. Aurelio jumped into the boat which almost capsized. It took him a moment or two to cast off.

"It's no good," Moro said, coming up beside him. "I told you to bale out. You won't do it now in the time. You've let her get away."

Aurelio would have thrown himself into

the water in a frenzy, but Moro held him back. "She won't get far. A woman's worn out when I've finished with her. Watch!"

The girl was rolling helplessly in the current, incapable of guiding herself, and ending up in midstream, splashing feebly and drifting rapidly towards the weir. "So she can't swim," said Moro. "Still, I gave her a good lesson."

"She's drowning," Aurelio cried, "and I..."

"Come back in the shelter," Moro urged,

pulling him by the arm. "Have you gone crazy? It couldn't be better. She left us of her own free will. Besides, girls like her always talk."

Aurelio had lost sight of that black speck and stood trembling, straining his eyes.

"Now I'll have a smoke. Be glad to," Moro said as he went back inside. When, a few minutes later, Aurelio joined him and threw himself down on the sacks, Moro went on curtly: "Have a cigarette. Never mind. You shall do it first another time."

## Composition

*for John Berger*

Courbet might have painted this  
gigantic head: heavy, yellow  
petal-packed bloom of the chrysanthemum.

He would have caught the way  
the weight of it looms from the cheap-green  
vase this side the window it lolls in.

But he would have missed the space  
triangled between stalk and curtain  
along a window-frame base.

The opulence of the flower  
would have compelled him to ignore  
the ship-shape slotted verticals

of the door in the house beyond  
dwarfed by the wand of the stem;  
and the gate before it would not

have echoed those parallels to his eye  
with its slatted wood, its two  
neat side-posts of concrete.

The triangle compacts the lot: there  
is even room in it for the black  
tyre and blazing wheel-hub of a car

parked by the entrance. But the eye  
of Courbet is gluttoned with petals  
as solid as meat that press back the sky.

*Charles Tomlinson*