



# The Italian who Lived on Twenty-six Cents a Day

By Walter E. Weyl

With Pictures by Wladyslaw Benda

**F**OR three centuries America has been a land of settlers. Race after race has come from Western Europe to Eastern America, forcing its way over mountains and prairies, through forests and deserts, until the continent has been peopled.

Now, from Eastern and Southern Europe come new settlers, anxious, like those of old, to gain a foothold. The conditions are different. The environment of the early settler was the trees and stumps; that of the new is men and tenements. The early settler was on the lookout for Indians; the new pioneer looks out for trolley cars and automobiles. The weakness of the old settler grew out of his isolation; that of the new settler grows from congestion. The early settler suffered from crop failures; the new settler suffers from business failures and industrial depressions.

Conditions change, problems change, but the bread and butter need of humanity remains forever. It is with this need that the new settler struggles; it is through this struggle, fought on American soil, by Americans in process, that the new settler gains his foothold.

That first day in America Pacifico  
sweated and sweated.

Even for New York it was hot. The  
noonday sun blazed upon the baking  
asphalt, the swinging Italian signs gleamed

in the fierce white light. You could have  
cooked an egg in the sunshine.

Pacifico did not mind the heat. He  
was too absorbed in all that his great  
friend Vincenzo told him and showed

him. In one memorable morning the immigrant had seen the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, the World Building, the Third Avenue Elevated, and the swarming streets of Little Italy. Vaguely Pacifico thought of big America; of the push-carts, standing cheek by jowl, loaded down with apples and cantaloups and tempting lemons and oranges; of the lazy flies buzzing about the penny slices of anæmic watermelon upon the wooden tray.

"You did well to come to me," commented Vincenzo, the labor agent. "The other padroni—they are thieves and scoundrels."

The newcomer tried to listen, but there was too much to see. He watched Giovanni, the watermelon vender, rise from his soap-box, adjust his Alice-blue undershirt, hitch up his scarlet suspenders, and, with a swish of a blunt hand, brush back his damp black hair. Then Pacifico looked at the high, hunched houses, yellow, red, and drab, with overhead lanes of cluttered fire-escapes. Everywhere were Italians. The narrow alleys, the obscure entries, the gay thronged street (rather a congregation than a thoroughfare), throbbed with the staccato cry of a Latin town. From dingy cellar shops emerged Neapolitans, Calabrians, Sicilians, rising out of darkness into garish light. Save for the ubiquitous Chinese laundryman, it was a solid block of Italy. Only the dignified public school—that inexplicable American charity—reminded Pacifico that he was not in Italy, but in the land discovered by the Genoese sailor.

"Those other padroni," went on Vincenzo, "are rascals and cheats. They rob you of the last soldo. Do you know?"—and here he poured into Pacifico's incredulous ear quick, vibrant stories of unutterable villainies of rival labor agents. Men had been stripped to their uttermost farthing, boys had been forced into beggary, and girls into a nameless, shameful bondage among brutal, incomprehensible aliens. Ah, but he, himself, Vincenzo, the impeccable, had lived a righteous life, earning his scanty profits by hard, honest labor, continuing his business less for himself than for his friends, foremost among whom was Pacifico Sabella. "But those other padroni"—and rapidly he recounted a dozen more stories.

The suspicions of a less trusting man might have fattened on the unctuousness of Vincenzo's tones and the shiftiness of Vincenzo's black eyes. But Pacifico thought no evil. As he shudderingly heard the horrific tales his grasp tightened on the labor agent's arm. "Most surely I come to you, Vincenzo. You are my unique benefactor."

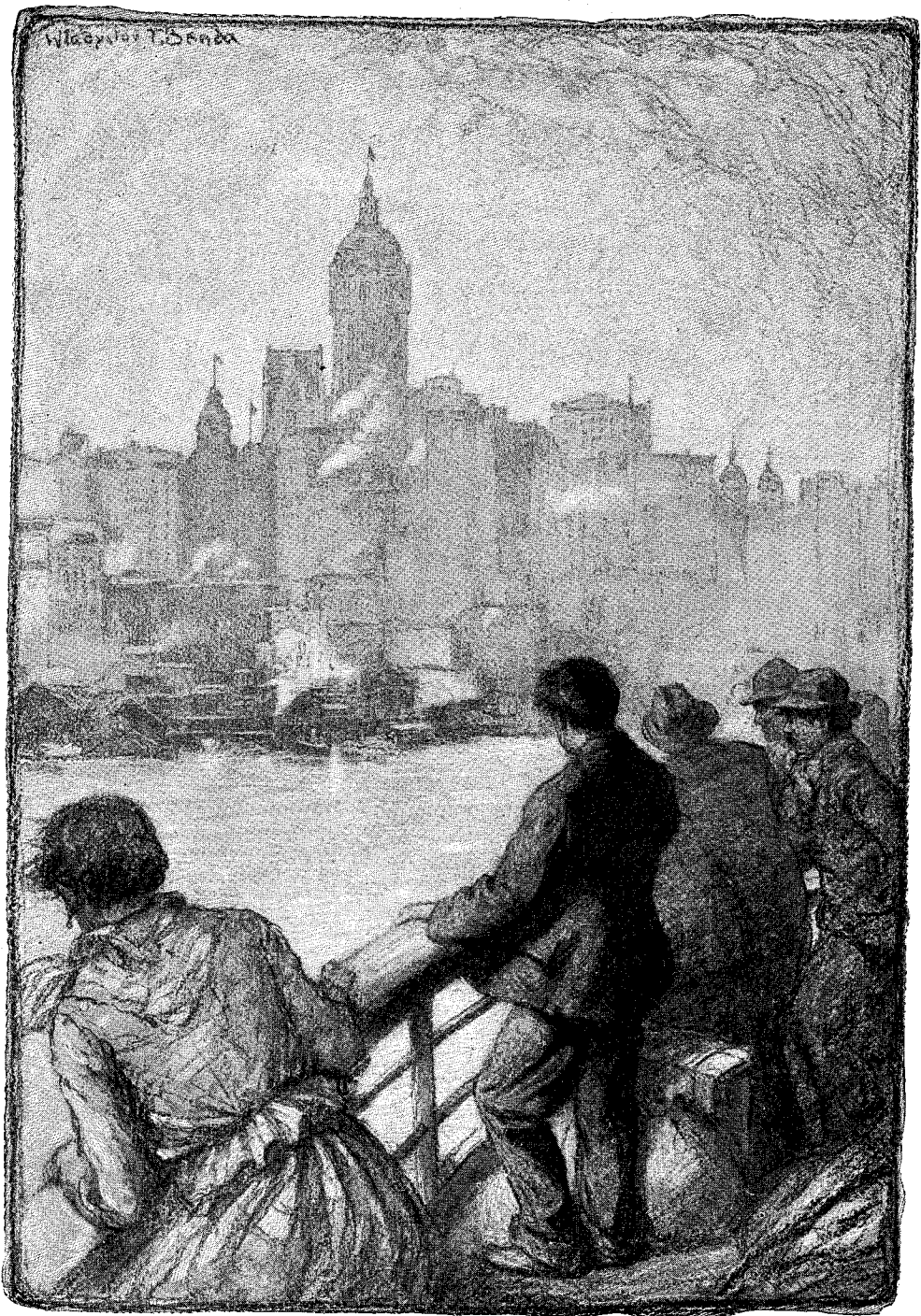
Pacifico had come to America for money. In his village-nurtured imagination the great Western land was the miraculous goose that laid the golden eggs. In America men got jobs at \$1.50 (seven and a half lire) a day; from America came glorious apparitions, Italian peasants transformed into American gentlemen.

Yet beneath this coating of gold there was another thought in Pacifico's dull mind. In America men were free; in America no king oppressed the people with taxes on salt and sugar and all the things that the poor must have. There was a vague Republican tradition in Pacifico's family. A peasant grandfather had seen Mazzini and the great Garibaldi; he had heard Italy's "*Grido di dolore*," and had escaped from the field of Monte Suello with a scar that Pacifico himself, as a little boy, had touched and admired. Now, as a man, Pacifico longed to be the free citizen of the free American Republic.

In this the newcomer was to succeed. At five the next morning he reported for work; at seven, with forty other Italians, he was wielding a pick on a railway thirty miles from the city. All day long the dry-throated laborers toiled in the broiling sun; all day long the Irish boss swore roundly at the new recruit. But who would not be sworn at for a dollar and a half a day? Pacifico smiled a placating smile and timorously imitated the other men. For days he remained the special object of the boss's attention. "You blank blank dirty Guinea," stormed the boss, "you'll never know a blank blank thing about this blank blank work in a blank blank million years."

Now the only words in this objurcation that Pacifico understood were the blank blank, but he put a clear, logical mind upon his labor, and he soon perceived by the lessening volume and velocity of oaths that he was making progress. He secured his dollar and fifty cents a day, minus his railway fare, minus the arbitrary charge





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for the doctor, minus Vincenzo's fee, minus the exorbitant sums extorted for the rotten food that Vincenzo sold him. Pacifico, born in a bottomless poverty, was not spoiled, and he shrugged his shoulders at the hard work, the bad food, and the ceaseless exactions. The essential fact remained: he earned a dollar and a half a day; he lived on twenty-six cents a day.

Then, by a blessed miracle of heaven, Pacifico learned fifty English words in less than that many weeks. It was a small vocabulary, but every word, including the invaluable oaths, bore some concrete relation to work and wages. Thenceforth, though he knew it not, Pacifico was on the highroad to success.

The Irish boss was profanely pleased when he discovered Pacifico's linguistic attainments. He made him an interpreter for the "foreigners." "Go to New York and pick up more men," he one day told Pacifico.

The trip was often repeated, and soon Pacifico was a dispenser of wages and the second or "little boss." He was made *bordante*, with the lucrative privilege, if he so desired, of selling inferior goods at exorbitant prices to other Italians in the labor camp. Pacifico, with a desire for gain tempered by conscience and a sense of decency, sold good food at fair prices. Still he prospered. Soon he ran two camps, then three, paying twenty dollars a month and board to the young fellows who became his representatives. As his labor office in New York grew he became a power in the ward, for he had favors to give, jobs to distribute, and votes to influence. He was no less a personage than his one-time benefactor and exploiter Vincenzo, the labor agent.

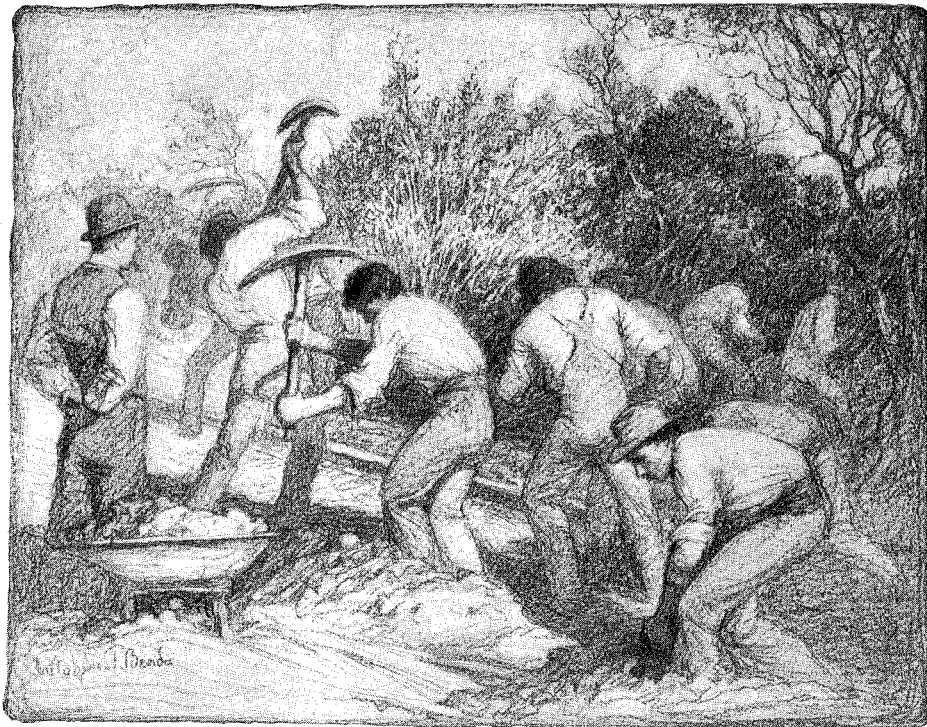
On a bright April day, five years after Pacifico had landed in New York, he made his triumphal visit to his native town. There was no one in all the neighborhood like unto the peerless Pacifico Sabella. So thought the young woman who, of all the redundant maidens, was graciously elected to be the labor agent's helpmeet. So, too, thought all the brothers and sisters of Pacifico, who were given steerage tickets to the new land. The *Americano* almost emptied the village, and each man who translated himself swore by Pacifico and the miracle-working America.

Not all the peaceful flock that followed in Pacifico's wake, not all the multitudinous Italians who land at Ellis Island and peer at you wonderingly through the iron gratings, not many, in fact, hope or dare hope for so startling an ascent. In America, also, the geese walk barefoot; in even this gold-paved land a man must struggle to rise to his feet. Yet even before his journey ends, even on the deck of the overcrowded steerage, the Italian immigrant has heard the word "Freedom," and has been touched by the magic wand of a new weird ambition.

Think what it means, this word Freedom, to the Sicilian dreaming to the stars in mid-ocean. His has been a race of peasants fettered by law, religion, and custom, oppressed by generations of conquerors, big and little. The Greek, the Roman, the Northern Barbarian, the Arab, the Norman, the Spaniard, have all set their foot upon his neck. There have been revolts and revolutions and mutterings and executions and Sicilian Vespers and sudden bloody mutinies, but year by year, century by century, the oppression has gone on. His road has been blocked by State and Church, by king and priest, his eyes have been sealed, his ambition killed, his pride of self, his hope, his dreams, crushed out relentlessly by oppression and ignorance. At last he hears of a limitless freedom, a boundless, measureless opportunity, and instinctively his hard, broad hands go out to the mythical land of promise that lies behind the Statue of Liberty.

Freedom, the illiterate Italian soon learns, is freedom to err and suffer. There is a penalty for the new opportunity, and a price. From the day when in his native village he first listened to the plausible steamship ticket agent, he became involved in an almost inextricable mesh. That talk led to the ticket, to the voyage, to the unscrupulous agent on the New York side. The agent takes from the immigrant a five-dollar bill, and then conducts the newcomer to a saloon, where there is a little drinking and much loud talk about dollars and jobs and America and a strange, wonderful something called Tammany. The immigrant is taken to a lodging-house and kept there until he has no more money. Then





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he is sent off to a labor camp, where he works excessive hours for a wage which goes in unfair charges to the man who furnishes him with necessaries. Perhaps, after a week's work at a job for which he has paid three or four dollars, he is discharged in order that the same labor agent may get another fee from another patient "greener."

Such is the Italian immigrant's initiation into America. It is a preliminary to getting a foothold. It may be a preliminary to something else. The uninstructed peasant, falling in with thieving, thriving fellow-countrymen, may quite misunderstand the limitations of the new freedom. He may come to think that the little banker who absconds with half a million dollars of his fellow-countrymen's money, the Italian politician who buys immunity and favors from venal judges and policemen, the whole army of sharks and sharpers, Italian, Jewish, Irish, and American, are men to be copied with pious patience. He may die in the trenches, or come out legless or armless, without a cent for his injury. He may be stricken with pneu-

monia by the treacherous wind that comes in through the cracks of the shanty's wall. He may rise a little, save money, pay for tickets which are never sent, invest with his banker money which is never returned, and be thrown within five years back upon himself, spent, exhausted, ground down to utter helplessness.

Yet, despite this ring of rogues, the average Italian immigrant gets his foothold. Walk through the streets of an Italian quarter and you will become convinced. There is poverty here, as there are overcrowding and unsanitary dwellings and a cramped, unwholesome life. But there is not the abysmal wretchedness of Naples or Palermo. You do not see so many beggars, nor starving men or women. The men wear collars, and even the children wear shoes. The shop windows shriek their dwindling stocks of phonographs, jewelry, books, brass bedsteads, macaroni, and sophisticated Italian wines. The poor Italian has money, and he buys.

The emergence of the Italian from a former hopeless, wantless existence is

encouraging; it is also picturesque. At six in the evening the watermelon vender is still at his place, gossiping with unprofitable customers in a mountain dialect of Basilicata. Near by stands old Ignazio, with pale-green shirt and colorless battered vest, with black, piercing eyes and hair sable-silvered, like some gentleman of Medicean Florence fallen upon evil days; he still sells his lettuce and his parsley and his thin little bunches of asparagus. Then, too, there is Adolfo, tall, stooping, broad-shouldered, who looks the comic opera brigand, yet does nothing more romantic than sell amber lemonade. Others come. Along the narrow, humanity-jammed street, smoking sullenly under the declining sun, the home-bound Italian workers pass. Two brothers in earth-stained, faded-blue overalls, with shovels strapped to sloping shoulders; a fat Calabrian with trousers caked in asphalt; a low-browed hod-carrier streaked with lime; a grizzled Sicilian, crushed under a load of paper waste, form part of an infinite procession of toilers. To narrow tenements they go, up creaking wooden stairs, into sultry rooms, where by the lessening light their wives and daughters sew the "pants" and vests for the sweatshop trade. More come, more and more. From all sections of the city, from all sorts of shops and works and "operations" they return, blunted by the day's toil, yet a little ahead in the task of gaining a foothold.

In all parts of the country, in all occupations, the Italians by desperately hard work are laying the foundation of a life in America. In the cities and villages of the North and West the Italians are the diggers, the hewers, the road-builders. There are tens of thousands of Italian laborers in Chicago, New Orleans, and San Francisco; Italian coal-miners in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Indian Territory; Italian toilers on the abandoned farms of New England, in the market gardens near New York, in agricultural colonies in New Jersey and Texas, in the peach belt of Delaware, in the fruit belt of North Carolina, in the cotton-fields of Florida, in the rice and sugar lands of Louisiana, in the great wine-growing districts of Southern California. In the cities are thousands of Italian tailors, barbers, shoemakers,

weavers, artificial-flower makers, cigar-makers, masons, stone-cutters, carpenters, bakers, cooks, and makers of musical instruments. Wherever you see a shovel, a steam-roller, or a dredging-machine there also you see Italians. The man with a broom or a blacking-box is an Italian; the panting men who carry loads of coal or of dripping ice to the tops of frowning tenements are Italians. In the hard, crude, out-of-door work of our civilization the Italian is getting a foothold.

It is easy to show all this by statistics; it is perhaps equally illuminating to give individual examples. The loquacious Giovanni, watermelon vender, is such an example. Giovanni is an artist and a musician, an artist despite his blunt hand and Alice-blue undershirt, a musician despite a prematurely overstrained voice. There are wonderful harmonies in his round, ringleted head, wonderful memories of song-filled days on Sicilian lighters, of blissful evenings in the topmost gallery of the Metropolitan Opera-House, of one ecstatic, triumphant night when something in him moved and he broke into "*La Traviata*," to the excited admiration of those in the restaurant and the vociferous cries of "*Bis, bis, bravo, bis!*" To Giovanni America is a medley of harmonies and discords, a vague swimming panorama of sound and color, with his anæmic watermelons and the dirty indispensable pennies in a sharp foreground.

Yet, though carefully scanning each of these pennies, the thrifty street merchant has a comfortable balance of a hundred dollars in the dingy, brass-grated bank of a fellow-townsmen in Elizabeth Street. Five years ago Giovanni landed in America with ten dollars. A week later he had nothing, and a "friend" to whom he had been recommended owned his ten dollars. Then Giovanni whitewashed. Any one can whitewash. In the Italian quarter—parenthetically—any one can do anything. In a month he had been rag-picker, painter, errand boy, bootblack, Jack-of-all-trades. He kept another man's stand, and soon had his own. Eventually, he predicts, he will set up a prosperous fruit business; he will send for his wife and "*bambino*." He will make money. Thereafter he will be an artist and musician.

Then, again, there is the thrifty boot-

black, bow-legged Cesare. There are bootblacks and bootblacks, and Cesare is a bootblack. "It needs a doctor to use the knife," he insists, "and an artist to use the brush." Cesare is a kind son, a close-fisted, generous friend, and a man with a heart as warm as his legs are crooked. Monthly, since his first perplexed landing in America, a draft has gone to his aging father in Minora. When Cesare lost his all, his carefully garnered one hundred dollars, in the dishonest failure of a little Houston Street bank, he would not join in the prosecution of the banker. "I want my money back," he said, "my *cento scudi*, but if the paper you ask me to sign is to put Pasquale into jail, I'd rather"—here the poignant sense of his loss brought the hot tears to his eyes—"I'd rather lose every soldo of it." When any one in the tenement fell ill, Cesare was the first of many to help. He would bring down a plate of macaroni for the youngest child, or he would contribute half a bucket of coal, or, if distress reached an acute stage, he might even put an unwilling hand into a ragged, capacious pocket, and with ostentatious stealth press a dollar upon the afflicted. No wonder that Cesare, the well-beloved, was godfather to many children.

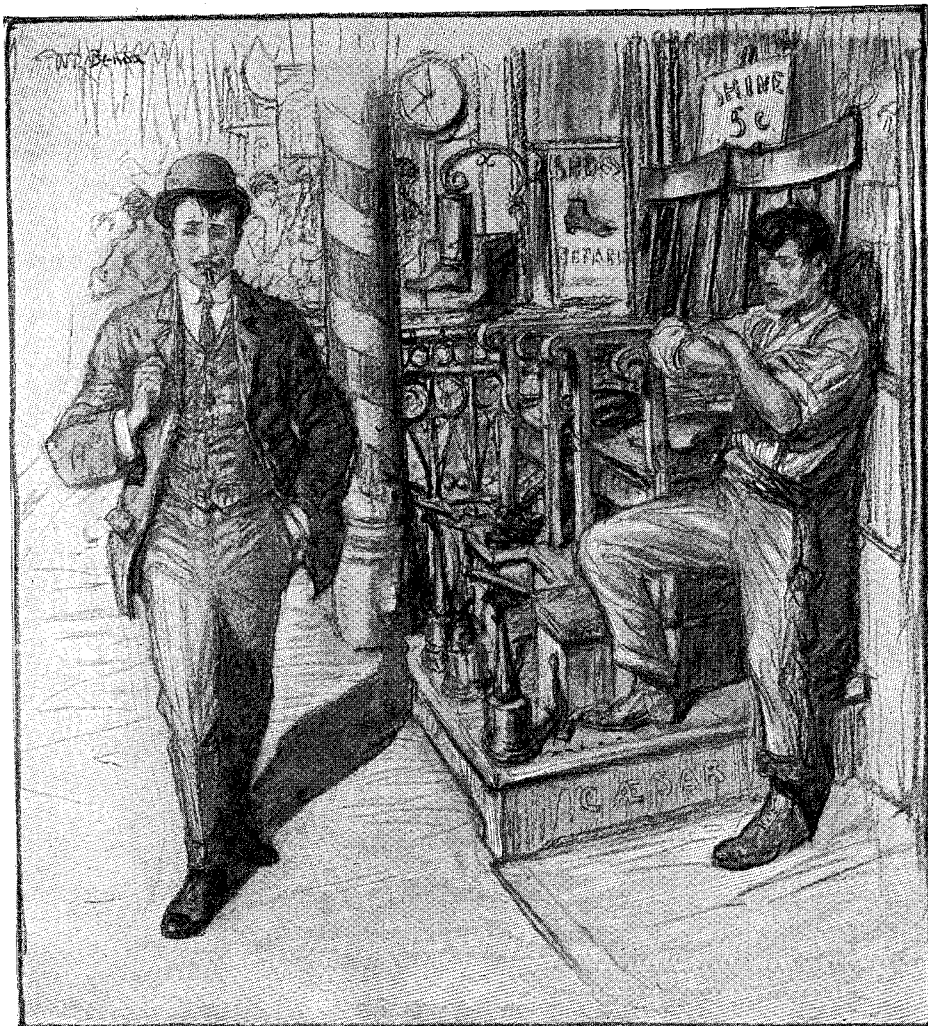
It is Cesare's gettings, however, and not Cesare's givings, that have the widest social significance. Cesare, whose business name is Mike, has built up during two decades, upon the contemptuous nickels thrown him, the tidy fortune of \$17,000. At first he had lived on nothing, going about in rags that a scarecrow might have discarded. He wanted to save. Surely he could not imitate in dress or expenditures those Olympian Americans whose shoes he polished. But one Sunday afternoon he saw a fellow-bootblack arrayed in a derby hat, a stiff white shirt, an almost white silk tie, a great scarf-pin, and, most wonderful of all, a pair of shoes *brilliantly polished*. "You a 'shiner'!" gasped the dumfounded Cesare. It seemed an absurd anomaly that a bootblack who received five cents for shining other people's shoes should polish his very own for nothing. But the bewildering, revolutionary idea stuck. In America even a "shiner" could be a Sunday after-

noon *Signore*. In another month the bow-legged Cesare also wore a derby hat, a stiff white shirt, an almost white silk tie, a great scarf-pin, to say nothing of shoes which outshone the shoes of Luigi as the brilliant effulgence of the sun dims the lesser radiance of the moon. So, too, despite his frugal generosity, Cesare, by economy and hard, grimy, long-continued labor, outdistanced the savings of Luigi. Now the \$17,000 is to be invested in a house in the Bronx, not to live in—Cesare lives with his three brothers in two rooms on Second Avenue—but to make money.

Finally, there is the banker, Giacomo. You or I, who think of a banker as a dignified, soberly dressed, ultra-conservative millionaire, discussing debentures and equities and what not, would hardly recognize "Uncle" Giacomo as one of the financial fraternity. Giacomo is a cellar grocer who has "evolved." An ignorant fellow-countryman once asked him to forward twenty dollars to Italy and import a few bottles of Marsala. In a short time the erstwhile grocer, while retaining his groceries, became a banker, importer, express company, real estate office, and notary public. His sole capital was the friendship of the men of his native village, who loved "Uncle" Giacomo because he was like them, and because in his office you could spit on the floor. Uncle Giacomo lets himself into miniature wildcat enterprises, and his depositors are surer of a friendly smile than of the eventual return of their money. Still he offers not only a high rate of interest, but all sorts of accommodation, from forwarding your letters to giving you legal and personal advice; and does he not command the respect of the President of the United States, since the Chief Magistrate has made him a notary public and has actually deigned to establish a postal sub-station in Giacomo's office?

The very existence of Giacomo, the very activity of scores of little Italian banks in New York and other cities, proves that the immigrant is gaining his foothold. The Italian workman earns and saves. Some of his savings go to Italy, for eighty per cent of all Italian immigrants are males and eighty-five per cent are adults, and the dependents at home must be supported.





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So long as the ideal of the immigrant is to repatriate himself, savings are largely shipments of money to Italy. But, intending to return, more and more Italians remain. Italy comes to them and settles in the next street, in the next house; the immigrants work, not for a farm in Italy, but for a foothold in America; their savings are invested in the new country.

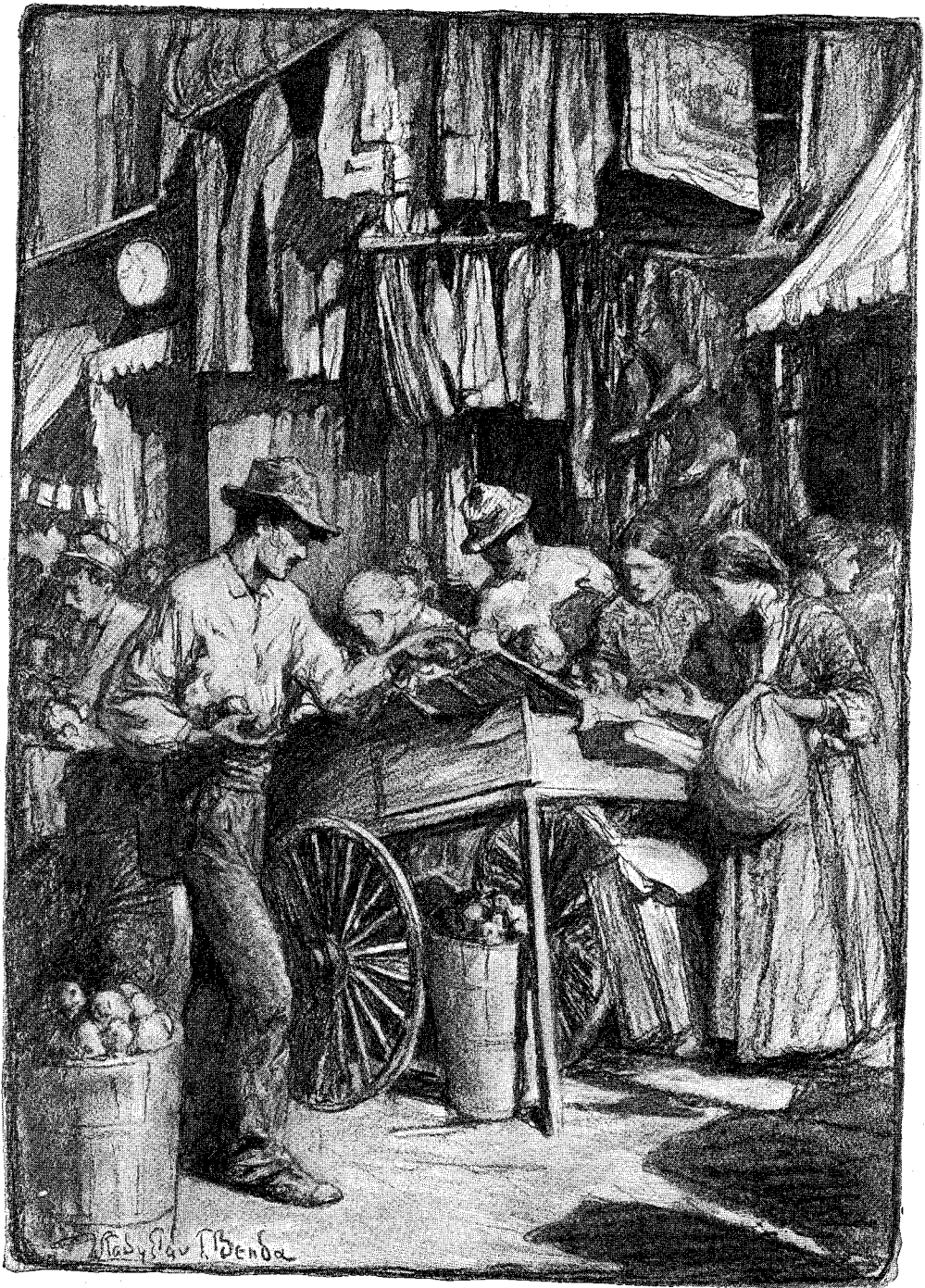
Already these savings and investments are swelling to large proportions. "We have deposits of over two millions," the president of a New York Italian savings bank told me. "If we received all the savings of the Italian immigrants, we should have tens of millions."

Enormous amounts, aggregating fifteen

to twenty millions of dollars, are collected in small sums by the little banks which dot the Italian quarters. Italians in New York City own over four thousand real estate holdings (valued at \$20,000,000), over ten thousand retail stores, and a considerable number of wholesale establishments. In Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, and San Francisco Italian savings and investments are proportionately larger. The number of Italian professional men—physicians, druggists, dentists, lawyers, public school teachers, architects, and mechanical engineers—rapidly increases.

That the Italians gain their foothold is also evidenced by their newspapers. There are dozens of these periodicals in





"IGNAZIO STILL SELLS HIS LETTUCE AND HIS PARSLEY  
AND HIS THIN LITTLE BUNCHES OF ASPARAGUS"

America—dailies, weeklies, and monthlies. Their mere existence indicates progress. Their advertising columns, true chronicles of the times, tell the story of Italian advancement in America. The Italians have money which advertisers want. Italian lawyers, doctors, dentists, pharmacists, photographers, bankers, bakers, restaurant-keepers, booksellers, opticians, and midwives offer their services or wares. The Restaurant of the Iron Crown, the Café of the House of Savoy, announce their attractions. Steamship companies, breweries, department stores, advertise. Here, too, is reflected the demand for brass bedsteads and phonographs. Real estate agents fill columns with proffers of cheap lots. Saloons and restaurants are offered for sale. Investment opportunities—good or obviously bad—are shrieked out in leaded columns. An air-line about to connect two great American cities spends a deal of Italian money to attract more Italian money. Though individually still poor, the Italians in the aggregate have large sums for savings, for investment, even for speculation.

If these sums could be divided with exact equality among all the members of our Italo-American population, each immigrant would be poor, but beyond the pinch of a degrading poverty. Even in the comparatively poor Italian population, however, there are millionaires and men with their tens or hundreds of thousands, while at the other end of the line there are many who have not a nickel for their night's lodging or their morning's breakfast. Thousands who escape the slow starvation of inanition are killed by dangerous work, by pneumonia and consumption, by their own ruthless exploitation, or by the exploitation of padroni. Thousands are cheated by the whole world, and are thrown back naked and ill upon the country from which they once fled.

Among those who fail, the educated Italian immigrant is often to be found. He is usually not so intent on gain, nor

so single-purposed. The superlatively cultured immigrant may find himself incapable of earning even a ditch-digger's wage. He is ready-made; he has ideals which clash with the rude materialism of the primal struggle to live. He gives lessons; he teaches to a careless, contemptuous youth the glorious history of the motherland; he dries up in a fever of misunderstood patriotism and unextinguishable homesickness.

It is upon another, a coarser and a more simple human material that the transmuting power of American life works. The man who here gets his foothold was, in Italy, a peasant; he was looked down upon as a clown and a lout. Here, if he succeeds, he sends his children to school, he begins to take part in public discussions, he contributes awkwardly to the formation of public opinion. He does all this because he becomes, as did our earliest pioneers, economically independent. A bank account to-day is what a log cabin and a hundred-acre lot were a hundred years ago.

This new, crude Italo-American voter and citizen of the United States is not a product of Old World culture, yet he brings with him an inheritance which is buried, but not lost. This peasant has his own vague ideals of art, of patriotism, of humanity and liberty. Though untrained, he is musical, for in Italy, so the proverb runs, "even the shoemaker's daughter can play the piano." He is timid, but courteous; rough, but with rugged virtues. In his blunt fingers is the cunning of centuries of craftsmen, in his dulled eyes is the sense of beauty of generations of artists, and in his heart there is a deep, warm, upwelling enthusiasm for much that is good and all that is beautiful. From these helots of our Western civilization, the despised Italian laborers, much genius and beauty will spring.

But that is for the future, for the second or the third generation. The problem of to-day is the getting of a foothold.

This article will be followed in successive Magazine Numbers of The Outlook by three other articles by the same author, entitled "Joseph Kaplan: Russian Jew," "Pericles of Smyrna and New York," and "Jan: the Polish Miner."





MAJOR-GENERAL LEONARD WOOD, U. S. A.  
Photographed for The Outlook at Governor's Island by Paul L. Anderson, October 16, 1909