

CAMP 29

1.

Far away, where the yellow and red strip of the coast grew thinner, shading into reflections of the same colour both in the sky and sea until it disappeared in two promontories, you could foresee the bay: and already the seagulls, the ossifrages, buoys showing the entry, contaminated the blue compactness of the waters, as if they were spoiling that density of colour, on which the ship had seemed to rest safely up to that time. The prisoners crowded their part of the deck, on the prow, half naked, yelling, pointing in this or that direction, while above, on the castle, leaning out and directing his binoculars was the spotless navigation officer who had appeared behind the glass, every now and then during the crossing, as to remind them of detachment, slavery, misery. Bombay.

The ship advanced slowly, too slowly, at the same speed since it had left Suez, without leaving any ruffling behind. It was a caravel, an old one, 3.700 tons, voicing a panting to-and-fro of clanking noises out from the engine room, as if it was constantly on the point of stopping. One deck, slightly higher than the water-line, and a huge castle of glass and ladders rising creakingly in a frightening impression of unbalance. It had been launched in 1870.

The prisoners had found a brass plate, worn out and green spotted, on which, along with the plan of the ship, was a list of technical data. They knew everything about the ship: they had learned the plate by heart, copied it out on pieces of paper grabbed in the loo, for all the fits of rage of the Anglo-Indian escort, as they had planned to seize the ship, premeditating it, sharing the tasks in groups, to entrust with direction the few naval officers that were among them, and who might take them to Japan, or goodness knows where. Yet they were off to Bombay and the ship went on panting without wake in English hands; that dirty ship let us hope it sank.

On the deck, sitting on a case, a dark disconsolate prisoner looked at his own hands. He needed to smoke, a strong, desperate need, as if he were starving to death. He had been a prisoner for a month and a half, without smoking more than ten cigarettes. A month and a half; including those two or three made out of pipe tobacco and toilet paper, which he was given by Spallanzani, the short and hairy paratrooper who had succeeded in maintaining a certain taste for generosity. And who had maybe stolen, paper and tobacco, not to be dying to smoke, Spallanzani.

And yet the dark and disconsolate prisoner looked at his own hands, and nails, dirty for months and even more since when, in Aden, they had loaded up coal suffocating the prisoners whom they had stowed and locked up, to prevent them watching outside. They had let them out on the deck only when the ship was leaving. And they were better off not getting out: Aden is a place of witches, grey and harsh hues, running vertical up the bare mountains that impend over the bay and give a den to the worst fowls of the air, the ossifrages, that row across the Asian sky and are probably the very same that nuzzle the corpses of the Parsee near Bombay.

And everything had changed since then, since Aden. Before then the African coast, yellow, horizontal, terraced, had followed the ship along the Red Sea like a familiar landscape. After all it was the last bit of home for them, that African continent they had reached and roamed by Italian transport, travelling it all over under machine-gun and cannon shots. Since Aden no more of this: broken decks, a different light, a different way of being sick, the Indian Ocean to cross with that jalopy that looked always on the point of unbalancing to the left or to the right under the weight of the castle, its endless glass and ladders.

The prisoner sitting on the case thought of Bombay. He repeated to himself: Bombay, Bombay, Bombay, slowly, with measured idiocy, searching in that word for a bit of Salgari and Sandokan, a bit of childhood. He thought of Christopher Columbus too, but he couldn't reach any vivid feeling that could possibly overcome the misery of that crossing. Bombay, Bombay, Bombay. It is the same the whole

world over, everywhere it is the same as wretched Italy. It is not worth travelling. You leave, you get somewhere. It is the same everywhere. After all Aden was no change either: such a landscape must have been dreamed of before, reading through fairytales. Everywhere you go, a face, a fountain, a house, a shop window, you always recognize something, and you are not sure whether you have seen it or only dreamed of it, once, but that most certainly existed for you. When you do not recognize any longer, that means you have changed, like that, no reason why, because everybody changes and you drop from your heart people you once used to love.

The crossing had been awful: *270 messing 170 sleeping* was written on the walls of the premises where they had flung three hundred and fifty Italian officers. Let alone those were poor numbers, as the ship had been assigned to carry Indian troops, and it is well known the English do not have any respect for coloured people. It was hot in the hold. In November and December, but bare-chested it was ok and everybody dripped his own sweat on the neighbour's legs. A thin wooden partition wall divided the hold in two and the other half was filled with fortuitous passengers, half-breed, Levantines, dirty and stinking, and one of them played the guitar every night singing with a hoarse voice: «Rosamunda, Rosamunda, what a wonderful day». But those passengers also used to give us bread: secretly, one little piece for one thousand lira, and those who had some money left from the search would buy some because everybody was hungry, desperately hungry, so hungry that you couldn't possibly get up on your feet without seeing everything red and you had to close your eyes not to feel dizzy.

The prisoners fought and insulted one another, as there was no room even to sit down. At night all the hammocks were busy and you either slept on the tables, or underneath, thronged together with the others, and the hammocks were dripping sweat on people sleeping under. But they were good at night, some would sing a song, a slow one, others would tell their mate the story of their life, their whole life, from the day they were born until the day the English took them. Daytime was

tragic: cleaning shifts during the short break on the deck, shipwreck simulations, on the deck, with a life buoy around your neck and bright, sharp sunshine through the clear December air. And then would come the long hours before dark, loafing around and queuing for the loo. Off Aden, getting in, a rough sea had spoiled the night too, with the English and Indian throwing up all the time, lucky them, who had something to throw up.

Twenty days, but they were off Bombay now and they longed for India as a point of arrival. They had had enough of ships, trains, trucks, provisional camps, shortage of water to wash. They already thought of India as a season of their life they would spend in peace. They did not know where they would be taken: there were rumours about places, Kashmir above all, and they would think of mountains, of snow, of Kashmir's wool, with a sense of relief. And they were hoping to be separated from the colonels: the colonels were the curse: one would feel sorry for them and yet they would keep on an insolent behaviour; they would talk about battles having lost them; they would criticize high commands and fight for a spoonful of jam. Everybody would turn to them to ask for a fatherly glance and would be rejected. Let them go their own way then: on our side the chosen, captain included. Still you could not guess which formation was the most wretched. Off Massaua, at night, the prisoners had opened up portholes looking at an Italian hospital ship all lit up, maybe loaded with women and kids repatriating. Everybody was suddenly in a rush and the English had realized people were escaping by letting themselves down from the largest porthole when ten of them had already swum away. The morning after the ship commander congratulated the senior colonel on the brave deed; he said sharks were off Massaua; he said the ten had been recaptured in Aden.

The ship docked in a quay creeping among the buildings of the harbour: women at the windows, more Indian sentries, a villa-like edifice made an attempt of garden, with four green-wooded cannons pointing at the sea. A lot of ships in the roads, it looked like rich and boundless traffic, captive balloons swinging in the motionless air as if bored with that excess of precaution that had inflated them. Hours later the

prisoners were lined up on the dock: and off he came too, the one who had sat still on the deck while the ship was getting in, and he looked tall, as if he had freed himself from misery. He bumped into a sentry who ordered him to stop with a gun: he took an irritated look at the sentry and, taking one more step with scorn, he made a grimace at him the way you do with kids to make them laugh: the Indian jumped backward frightened, legs opened up, and the prisoner laughed. Then he set out with the others among the sentries and soon they were on the train that had pushed as far as the tracks, where the goods trains get to load from the ships. He took the seat assigned to him finding none of his old comrades about: then he remembered he still had the bread ration for the whole day, his own and Spallanzani's, since each prisoner had to share its piece. He had some, of his part, but half an hour later there was no bread left. And luckily they had more food, and tea delivered, and a helmet, a quilt: they were all looking at each other smiling and they loved India; and the four day trip was good, even for the ones sleeping near the latrine, since on the quilt you could easily enjoy the beginning and the end of your sleep, thinking, and smoking even: cigarettes had been delivered. In four days the prisoners ate so much that when they got off the train they were sick of mustard and tinned meat; but they were happy because from the window they had seen stations, rivers, woods, monkeys, men, women, India; from the window to a certain point: the English had sealed them in leaving just a small opening; yet the prisoners soon learnt to know Indian sentries, calm and corruptible for matters of little account, provided there is no risk of going to jail.

For visitors travelling in good carriages, with their body clean and their clothes ironed, India is beautiful. Even more beautiful for the Italian visitor, who can easily recognize, on a large scale, the same colours, brightness of the sky, modulations of the hills, river bends as the ones he left in his homeland. Colours are more intense, but of the same quality, and the sky is astonishing, deep, much deeper, but with the same mixture of hues, very far from the white ruthless luminosity dominating Egypt, Greece, and other countries more Mediterranean than our own peninsula. Yet the

landscape suddenly changes when man appears with his dwellings and animals helping him: then you are plunged into the East, in a world of flies, strong smells, markets, sunshine, ragged people lying in their sleep, in that East setting its outposts in the Balkan region and stretching homogeneously eastwards, far beyond the journey of Italian deportees.

But these Italians did not have a nice trip: better than previous ones, at least they had more food this time, delivered in cans, which were divided into identical numbers by scrupulous eyes; worse than any other trip one could have had in civilized, or semi-civilized, countries. And yet they were looking about them, once off the train, with gratitude. They had enough food, and that looked like a good omen, it was a mild bright December day, which the northward journey was making slightly cooler, enough for them to feel comfortable in the torn, bloodstained coats, at least for those of them who had one. They were led to the camps. Some were carrying a backpack with the stuff left from the battles in it, most of them a bundle of the first items delivered: a towel, a bar of black soap, a toothbrush. For some minutes they walked through a wood, surrounded by a soft blue air shading the tree tops and the huge birds perched lazily on them. They felt like walking on tiptoe. Everyone was astonished at feeling a sensation of rebirth and relaxation, after all that travelling and heart-beating, and indulged in picturing the camp, the big house, that would welcome them. They crossed a river: an elephant was contemplating it and one could tell from the intermittence of its big ears' movements it was no holy religious symbol: they were looking at each other, the prisoners, and each one thought himself older discovering childlike smiles on other faces, as in a zoo tour. They climbed a hill and got to the camps.