

Today's Short Story

MARCHING ON

By Alma and Paul Ellerbe



WHENEVER I think of Rocco Antinori I have the feeling of understanding a little better what it is that makes some foreigners become citizens of the United States.

Not just technically, with papers and everything to prove it—which I guess doesn't matter much one way or another—but deep down in where they live, which matters a lot, both to the United States and to them.

I'm interested in that because it's my business. My name is Philip Denton, and I'm a United States naturalization examiner.

I was working in the Washington office, but I belonged out West, where I am now. I like going to the different county seats out here and standing up in open court and asking questions and then making the recommendations on the basis of which the district judges grant or deny citizenship.

It was during the war that I was in Washington. Rocco Antinori's shoe repair shop was on my way to work, and I passed it every day twice. He was a little, commonplace-looking middle-aged Italian.

The reason I began to notice him was that one day his naturalization papers passed through my hands down at the office. I wondered why he had become a citizen.

He didn't seem that much interested. I wondered after that when I passed by his place how he got like that, with all the life drained out of him.

ONE day I took him some work and was surprised to find 'hat' his life hadn't drained out of him. It was all in his eyes. Everything else about him had a whined look, but there was a lot of purpose of some sort in his eyes. Something well, fine and unconquered.

I got interested. I used to go into his shop and try to make him talk. But he had a reserve that shut him in like the wall of old shoes he sat behind. He was a good workman, and people brought him more than he could do.

I knew they taught cobbling in the prisons in Italy. I thought maybe he had been caught by some legal trap, and when they let him out had come to this country hoping for a new chance, and hadn't got much of one.

Sometimes his wife would be sitting there, too. She was a heavy, smoky-eyed, bitter-mouthed woman, with wide shoulders and hips and a lot of black hair that had usually slipped down into a big, loose knot on the nape of her neck.

Sometimes she had a boy with her about 6 years old. She sat in the bright light from the big electric bulb overhead and looked at her husband in a way that made me think she hated him.

MY landlady found out what it was that had happened between them, from a woman who lived over in their part of town.

"She blames him for the death of her sister," Mrs. Mulhare said. "She was killed by a runaway horse. Antinori could have saved her, apparently, if he had seen her, and tried. He says he didn't see her, and everybody believes him except his wife. He saved an old Negro man named Felix, who is half paralyzed and sells papers."

"He pulled his wheelchair chair out of the way in the nick of time. The horse plunged on into the sister and killed her. Nobody had liked her. She and Mrs. Antinori quarreled all the time, but now that she's dead, the Antinori woman can't live without her."

I suppose there was more to it. I suppose Antinori and his wife hadn't got along and the sister's death made it worse; but I don't know. Mrs. Mulhare told me, though, one reason why he had to work so hard; he went on a friend's note, the man couldn't pay, and he had to.

And that's all I found out in the way of facts. But—when it comes to that—what are facts, anyway? I went on walking past his shop and a few times more I went in for something or other, but I didn't see that look in his eyes any more, and my thoughts about what put it there wouldn't have come to anything if I hadn't run into him about a year later, on a Sunday afternoon, at Bolling Field, and had a glimpse of what it was that lay behind the facts.

THAT year in between had been an important time for me. I had been transferred back West, and had married—a western girl, who sees things the way I do. I was in Washington on official business, but I had brought her with me.

Everything in the East was new to her, and she was eating it up. I took her to see my old landlady because Mrs. Mulhare had been good

to me when I lived in her house, and the two of them liked each other, and that pleased me.

Something made me think of Antinori, and I asked about him. Was he out of debt? Were things any better for him?

Mrs. Mulhare said no, they weren't. She didn't think things ever would be any better for Antinori.

And then we went on out to Bolling Field, to see a big new war plane make an exhibition flight, and Antinori was there.

He had on his cheap black Sunday clothes, and a derby on his narrow head, and he was hurrying across the field with a touch of color in his thin cheeks and a look of interest and enthusiasm that amazed me.

WE, and most of the other Americans there, were a good deal stirred up just then by a lot of things. I remember my wife and I had been hearing a good deal of talk about how big machines like the one that was getting ready to take off were going to make it possible for the United States to win the peace of the world and then stabilize it.

We thought that now that our country was into it with both hands and both feet, it was all going to be stopped forever. Whatever the world may think of that, now, it was an exciting idea then.

The air was full of it, as it is of electricity on the tops of the highest peaks of the Rockies. You could feel it in the back of your neck.

But I didn't think Antinori could—with a wife who hated him—too indifferent to look up when the most important people on earth went past his window—buried in debt and old shoes.

We watched him in astonishment as he went along out there at the airfield, stumbling in his hurry, half laughing and talking aloud, and it struck me that maybe he had gone a little crazy.

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AND then we saw what it was. A

I'm sorry if I seem to have been making too much of it. Heaven knows it was simple enough. It was just his son. But—maybe it's sentimental to put it like that; maybe it was because of what was in the air, as I said; maybe it was because we were going to have a baby soon ourselves; but—well—you can laugh if you like—but it seemed to us that there was Antinori's soul running on ahead of him.

There were two, young officers there, one of the visiting bersagliers and an American flier. They got in front of the kid and blocked his way, to see what he would do. The little Antinori came to attention and saluted as solemnly as a general.

There was something so attractive and graceful and unself-conscious about the way he did it that they burst out laughing; we did, too, and so did his father and our eyes met. It wasn't funny, though. We weren't amused—we were somehow awfully touched, all three of us.

THE officers swung the child up between them and carried him off toward the place where the big planes rested like a flock of rocs from the Arabian Nights, his small head and eager little body outlined against the blue sky, bobbing along between the cock feathers of the old country and the overseas cap of the new.

Before he followed them his father stood there looking at me. I saw that for the first time he was seeing me.

"He's a fine boy, Mr. Antinori," I said, hoping ours was going to be a boy, too; and something made me stick out my hand.

He took it, and his eyes got even brighter and his cheeks redder.

"Yes—yes—yes!" he said rapidly, as the Italians do. "Citizen! Born here! American!" And went on off after him with that look on his face—the Italians show their feelings you know—that made me say what I did about his soul. His soul that's going marching on, whatever happens to him back there behind his wall of old shoes, with his bitter-mouthed wife and his debts! . . .

WHEN people go jogging past me on their way into citizenship—all the nations of the earth—like coffee beans through a coffee mill—asserting that they are attached to the principles of the Constitution of the United States, I find myself less and less sure every year of the strength of the process arranged by Congress and more and more sure of the one arranged by nature.

When I hear that sonorous oath of allegiance in which they "absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereign," go booming over their heads. I've come to feel that they probably mean it, even if they don't understand a word of it, if they've got a native-born kid or two that they are concerned with watching go marching on ahead of them into Americanism.

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THE END.

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OUR BOARDING HOUSE

With Major Hoople



OUT OUR WAY

—By Williams



FRECKLES AND HIS FRIENDS

—By Blosser



WASHINGTON TUBBS II

—By Crane



ALLEY OOP

—By Hamlin



BOOTS AND HER BUDDIES

—By Martin



TARZAN AND THE LEOPARD MEN

—By Edgar Rice Burroughs

