

## [Swiss Stonecutter]

Roaldus Richmond Men Against Granite

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### SWISS STONECUTTER

Death was already in his shrunken face and drawn eyes. The once sturdy body had wasted terribly in the last year. The windows of the little sun-porch overlooked the railroad tracks and the long gray sheds on the river bank. By raising himself in the bed Castoli could see the shed in which he had worked so many years. Beyond the plants the river flashed in the sunlight, and on the other side automobiles passed along the concrete highway. Castoli, wistful and patient, watched the passage of life outside.

It was difficult for him to speak. But he was glad of someone to talk to. The sun was warm through the glass, accenting the pallor of his face and the deep lines that seamed it. The dull eyes turned to his little vineyard. A sudden rasping cough brought the tears. "Some days I don't cough much," he apologized. "But today it is not so good." He shook his head and a lock of hair fell on his forehead. He wore a small moustache. "They used to kid me" he said. "Told me I looked like Hitler. They know what I think of Hitler. Mussolini, too.

"I cut granite for thirty years. I stop then — but it was not soon enough. I learned my trade back home in Switzerland. Just across the border from Italy. We cut some nice stone. It was a different kind — more like marble. I work eight or ten years there. Then I come here with some other stonecutters. Our friends have gone before. They write back what

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a wonderful 2 country. High wages, plenty money, plenty work. We decide to come over and see. It is like they say — then. I work one year here, save my money, go back to Switzerland. I got married. My wife is from the same town. Then come over to stay. I cut stone about twenty more years. The wages was good but I know then I have to stop. I left the shed — too late.

“It's got to come sometime. Old Zonfrello went last week. He was a year younger than me. We came over together, worked in the same sheds. He was a big man, strong like an ox. He used to laugh at the dust. “Wash it down with grappa,” he said. “The grappa burns it away.” Now Zon is dead. They had a big funeral. Cars lined all the way down the street. I watched them go by. Zon was a nice fellow. Everybody his friend, everybody like him. I don't know what his wife do now. Five-six kids and only one I guess earns money. She'll have to sell liquor like the other widows. I don't blame her. She's got to do something with those kids.

“My own boys — you know them? Yes, they're good boys, but what they do? They're wild. They waste their lives away. Drink, drink, drink. It's all right to be wild and drink. I did myself. But sometime you got to stop, straighten up, earn a living. You got to grow up. They don't seem to, those three.

“Joe, the musician, got married, but not good. He didn't marry the right girl. She don't help him. She makes him worse. Already they got three kids and all they do is fight and talk divorce. She fights with my wife, too, calls her names. She ain't been to see me since I came back from the hospital. Now she don't even let the kids come see me. I miss them. 3 Take Ernie, he's a good boy, everybody likes Ernie. He earns good money with his machines — those phonographs and pin-games. But he's out all night. He gambles. He's always in trouble. He was a bootlegger. He smashes up automobiles. Then he had a good beer business but he lost his license. Place too tough. Always in trouble, Ernie. But always he makes money some way. And Luigi. That one is no good. I don't like to say it but you

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know Luigi. Drunk all the time, fighting, never works, never stays home. Makes his mother cry, cry, all the time cry.

“I don't know. I come here with nothing much but my two hands. I made plenty money and I saved. After I stopped cutting stone I opened a store. I made more money for awhile. Then I lost a lot. But I own this house. I brought up my family, sent them to school, took care of them good. I don't know... I'm disappointed in my boys. I'd swap all three for that Tonelli boy that's studying to be a doctor. I don't like to say it. But you know my boys. They're good boys. But something they ain't got. Something I had — and tried to give them. They don't know how bad hurt a mother and father can be.

“Not that I would put them cutting stone. No, I never let them near the sheds. Not even if they wanted to go. I kept them away from the granite. There's been enough of that in this family. No, my boys will never cut stone. No matter what happens.

“The harest part is lying here all day. I don't read much now. I used to read a lot. The neighbors got books from the library. I don't feel like reading. I think about things. I got plenty to think about. Sometimes I think of Switzerland. 4 The mountains and the village where I lived. I only went back once after I brought my wife. Mussolini has changed it. It's an Italian village even if it's across the Swiss line. Spies everywhere. Everything is Viva Mussolini. Many people I had known were gone. But the old friends had changed. It was in their faces. They were afraid. I don't want to go back any more. When I think of Switzerland it's the way I knew it when I was young.

“In 1937 I vent to California to a sanitorium. It was nice out there. There were some more stonecutters in the place. A Swede from Minnesota and a fellow from Georgia. Both of them knew some men I knew. They had worked with them. Stonecutters used to travel around the country more. But granite is dying. People can't afford it now. Maybe never will again.

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“Sometimes I think I should have stayed in California. It's not so nice for the family having me here. You know, a sick man in the house. Gets on their nerves. I understand. They're very good to me, though. They do all they can. But just the same — there's nothing much —they know it and I know it. Anyway I wanted to be home. I don't bother them much. But I'm here like this.

Castoli gestured impatiently with the wasted hands that had once been so tireless and patient in the carving of beauty from solid granite blocks. He glanced from the vineyard to the sheds, flatcars loaded with rough slabs of stone, the rippling gleam of the river, and automobiles racing along the opposite bank. In the background a steep green hillside stretched up against the blue sky. White clouds floated above the crest. 5 “It's a nice country. It's home. And I'm glad to be here. It's the way I want it to be. It's got to come sooner or later. I had a good life. I worked hard. I had plenty good times, too. I got a family — grown up now. This house is theirs and there'll be something else, too. Not so much as I'd like — but something. When I lost my store I lost four, maybe five thousand dollars. Well, that's gone. A good thing I always saved.

“Not many come now to see me. I understand. They got their lives to live. So many things to do. The days go fast. I know, all right. You come again, anytime. And what I said about my boys — well, they're good boys. They'll be all right. And one thing makes me glad: they will never cut stone.”

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Young Father McCullen, the assistant priest, smiled. “I'm a Vermonter, yet I know very few granite workers until I was assigned to this parish by the late Bishop of Burlington. But for the granite industry Montpelier and Barre would be much like dozens of other Vermont towns. Perhaps that is why this group of workers easily became of primary interest to me.

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Especially the Spanish and Italian element — with emphasis on the latter. I was amazed that so small a number of Italian names appeared on our school register. I felt, as others no doubt had before me and as my pastor still does, that here was a problem for a priest, a duty for the Church to reclaim her children who had been born in the Faith.

“I learned that a majority of the Italian stonecutters<sup>6</sup> came from northern Italy, a section of the country long disposed to resist papal authority and often engaged in religious controversies. But their ancestors had been Catholics, the Faith was in their blood. Most of them were baptized, but with that the external manifestations of their faith ended. On the other hand I found as many who came to this country good church-going Catholics, but immediately their church-going stopped. That wasn't difficult to understand. A strange language, the difficulties presented in the confessional—these and other problems kept them from church.

“In Barre we have an Italian speaking priest. This spring he started a series of broadcasts in Italian. They were popular. His work and that of his fellow priests have borne fruit. Many Italians are returning to the church.

“I have found it easy to make friends with the Italians. They are an intelligent, likable people. For the most part they are law-abiding and just. A few of the older ones have said to me very frankly, 'Go to church now after all these years? Why, my neighbors, they would laugh at me! They are Italian like me. They do not go. And my children, what would they say to see their father and mother doing what they were not taught to do? Us, we are good people, we are honest, we believe in God, but to go back to church now——'

“I remind them that some day they will want burial from the church. 'Sure,' majority will cry, 'sure, burial from the Church, we want that. We are entitled to it. Are we not born in the faith? Sure, our fathers and their fathers before them had the requiescat in pace sung over their bodies. Us, we want<sup>7</sup> that, too. Some day before we die we will go back, we will make arrangements——'

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"An Italian-Swiss stonecutter, Castoli, was buried from St. Augustine's church just yesterday. He was born in Besazio, Switzerland, where he learned the stonecutting trade. He came to this country in 1900. He was an artist, a fine cutter, and he went into the granite business, co-proprietor of a shed with an Irishman. He kept on cutting stone with the rest. When his health began to fail he sold his interest in the shed, and operated a shoe store. It has been six or seven years now since he has retired from active business. The nuns tell me that he has always responded generously with his talent. When statues either in the church or in the convent chapel needed repairs, repairs that had to be done cleverly and artistically, he was always willing to work, and for no pay.

"He was an influential man, but his one sorrow was that he could not influence his sons. Three of them. Popular and well liked, but gamblers and drinkers. The youngest boy broke his ankle in a drunken brawl a few days ago.

"Mr. Castoli was one of those whose church-going stopped when he reached America. His three sons were baptized soon after their births, but they've never been church-goers. When the nuns heard that Castoli was sick they paid him a visit. They liked him. They were grateful for his kindnesses. They made weekly visits. At first the visits disturbed Mr. Castoli. He said the neighbors would laugh at him. Being visited by nuns. It was about this time that I started going to see him. I could see that Mr. Castoli's days were numbered. On my next 8 to the last visit to him, he said he was going to die soon, that he would like to go to confession and receive the Host.

"I had been sitting with him for an hour, I was nervous and worried, and was beginning to think my visits had been in vain, when suddenly he said, 'Well, Father, I have decided — I will go to Confession.'"

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3. Monday morning a requiem mass was sung for the repose of Cantoli's soul. The three sons sat with two friends in the living-room still heavy with the odor of death and flowers. Mrs. Castoli had taken the sleeping powder pressed upon her, and was resting in the room above. The oldest son, the musician, spoke. "That church music was good. It would have been better with a violin accompaniment. Especially with the singing. But it was good."

"The flowers filled two cars," Luigi, the youngest, said.

One of the friends asked, "The bearers, Lou who were they? There were some I didn't know."

"Some of them I don't know myself," Lou replied. "Batini represented the Stonecutters' Union; Sasci, the Italian Pleasure Club; Morgan, the Order of [Foresters?] (my father was Secretary-Treasurer until he resigned in the fall); Beglierini was a friend of my father's, he worked for him when my father owned the shed with Ryle; the other two were neighbors. MacDougal was there. He walked in back of the coffin. He's President of the Montpelier branch of the Union. My cousin Lola's husband wanted to be bearer. My mother wouldn't hear of it. He's had 9 a touch of t.b. He's just thirty. Got a touch of it after he'd worked in the sheds only a few years.

"He seems to be in good health now. He was up to Bill Bartlett's Health Camp for a year. When he came back he gave up granite work. He's running a hardware shop in Barre. Poor Lola. She's seen a lot of it. Her father died of it less than a year ago. He was a stonecutter, too. Then there was my father's brother—"

The musician nodded towards the spot where his father had lain. "He foresaw this. He'd seen it grabbing off stonecutters for more than forty years. That's why he didn't want us to go in the sheds. It was good enough for him, but he didn't want us to be a part of it—"

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The gambler suddenly sat upright in the chair. "What's the difference, one job or another?" His voice rasped. "It's just a chance you take—"