

[I Can Laugh at the Granite]

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Interview by John Lynch

ReWrite by Roaldus Rcihmond Men Against Granite I CAN LAUGH AT THE GRANITE

The room was sparsely furnished and bleak, but sunlight filtered through unwashed windows to brighten it. The huge white frigidaire looked out of place there. Garavelli leaned easily back in his chair, hands on the table that had seen many poker games and borne many bottles. Thinning black hair was brushed sleekly back from his lean well-cut face. He spoke quickly and eagerly, smiled readily. When excited he gestured mildly with his hands. Shirt-sleeves were rolled up on muscular frown forearms, and the collar was opened to the hair on his chest. Garavelli was a man of medium size with a lithe catlike swiftness and strength. His manner was one of good-fellowship; his dark glance was friendly as his smile, Only when aroused did his face harden into a mask of menace.

“Sure, I know you're all right,” said Garavelli. “I know it or I wouldn't tell you nothing. I've seen plenty of this granite business. Off and on I been in it a long time. In the sheds mostly, after it comes down from the quarries. I never worked round the quarries myself. I get enough of it right here in the sheds.

“They mark them and set them up in the sheds. A man lines the stone up for the surface-cutting machine. Them surface-cutters get the dust, boy. They got it bad. After the surface-cutter it goes to the hammerer or polisher. It's most all rock-face stuff. If you want a hammered 2 finish on the stone, that's rough finish, see? They do it with chisels run by air pressure. It's all pneumatic tools now. The chisels don't have just one blade. They have more blades that keep turning and cutting. The polishing machine is big. You run this big disk over the stone to get a smooth finish. To cut the stone to the right size in the first place they use big saws with steal shot under the blade. They have to keep water running

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on the saws they got so hot. There's one hell of a friction when you go to cut through granite. You know you ain't cutting butter, I tell you that much!

"I was born in Italy. I came here with my folks when I was young. Just a small kid. My folks was better off in the Old Country, but they had children over here. My brothers was working over here already. They wanted us to come over. There was lots of talk in Italy about all the money they made in America. The ones who came over first wrote back about the big money and the great things this country had. So more and more kept coming across.

"They left a nice country to come, too. I'll say they did. Mountains and lakes and flowers over there. The lakes was pretty. Deep blue water and hills all round them. Kids in the fields and gardens. I'm going back for sure some day. I think in 1942. Not to stay, no I don't stay. Just a visit. See my old home and some of the kids I played with and all the people in the town I knew. It will be different. Maybe I won't know the place. Maybe I won't know anybody there. But I can remember how it was. A big celebration in Rome in 1942, you know. Like the World's 3 Fair in New York. Maybe it's a world's fair over there. Lots of people are going, my friends from here. You come with us and I'll show you Italy. Go to Rome, you should see Rome. You'd like it. The old buildings, the streets, the people, the gay life they have. Not so gay probably since Mussolini. But for the celebration it will be. Come with me and stay in Florence. That's where you'll learn Italian. The north of Italy is what I like. I come from the north. Bisuschio, the province of Como. The north is the best. That's the place the royalty of Europe went for honeymoons and vacations. You've heard of Lake Como. Sure, it's a beautiful country. All bright colors, you never saw such colors." Garavelli nodded and tapped his head: "It's lasting up here, see? So we want to go back for a little while and see it again. You don't forget where you was born and played as a kid. You keep a feeling for that place no matter where it is. Before you die you want to see it if you got to go halfway back across the world to get there.

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“My wife goes with me, too. I have respect for women — good women. My mother showed me that. She was one of the best. I take my wife, but not the kid. He is six years old. Time enough for him when he grows up... My wife was born in this country. She's a citizen, same as me. I'm a citizen all right; they can't deport me now. You bet your life they can't! I haven't been back to the Old Country before. This'll be my last trip, too. Pretty quick I'll be old with no money...

“Sure, I like this country. You bet I like it here. Most of my life I spent here. This is my country. I married 4 here. I earn my living here. We are all Americans in my family. Didn't the Italians fight for this country in the last war? The Italian people here are all Americans, good Americans. Maybe they think of the Old Country; they are proud of it, sure. Maybe they want to go back some day, to see their homes or something like Como. But they won't stay. They like their new country here. They're proud of it, too. They'll come back to live. America is a swell country to live in.

“We landed in New York in 1912. We came on the [Conte?] di Savoia, a fine big boat. It took us fourteen days coming across. Like Columbus almost, huh? Now they make it across in four days. I liked the trip, but not for my father. He was sick. Not from the boat, from the vaccination.

“Since 1912 things have changed a lot. Ships and machines and people, too. Everything has changed. People most of all. Even the granite has changed. Machinery has changed that. Lots of men out of work. I've been laid off myself. I lost a lot of time. It hurts, too. When you're loafing you got to spend all the money you had saved. It goes fast when nothing's coming in. Of course working conditions are better now. It's better in the sheds. The suction take up the dust. Machines have done a lot of good, sure. But they have put a lot of men out of work, too. You bet your life they have. They've changed granite.

“I was lonesome when we first got over here. But I got over it pretty quick. I got acquainted with people in a little while. There were many from our country. After 5 awhile we got to

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know everybody. We mix good with people, see? It's a way my father had, and I got it too. We mix good and we spend money. You got to if you know lots of people... Not foolish, I don't mean that. Just to entertain our friends in a nice way. Sure, I used to spend it foolish before I got married. With a bunch I used to go to Montreal and spend plenty. What a bunch that was, too! Talk about your crazy ones and wild ones. What a bunch of Indians we had. All young stonecutters earning good money. We had some times. But no more of that stuff. Not for me. Not since I got married. My old woman wouldn't stand for it. Besides I got to think of the kid.

"I went to the public school. It was good, it was o.k. But I don't like school. I wanted to work, I quit school because I wanted to work. I was thirteen when I left school to go to work. Since then I've had plenty of work, boy. I got what I wanted: work, I got it, all right. Maybe you think I didn't get all the work I wanted. I worked in granite before I even left school. Sure, I started young with granite. Before I was thirteen I worked in the shed from six in the morning until eight. Then I went to school. Then I worked from four to five or six at night, every night after school. I was crazy for work, see? I started with granite when I was small, and I grew up with granite. So I know granite. I never made so much money but I know it. I have no trade that pays a lot like, like a cutter or sculptor. But I work all the time at something. I started out at grunting, they call it. Picking up chips and like that around the shed; odd jobs. Lumping is another 6 job I know. You chain the stones to be moved by the crane. You got to chain them right. Boxing is where you crate up the stones when they're finished ready to ship. Bedsetters are the men that set the stones under the polisher. I've done that, too. All those jobs. But I'm no carver. They get the highest pay, you know. They ought to get it. To get the high pay you got to take the dust, too... The best job I had was grinding tools. Sharpening the chisels and cuts they use on the granite. They call them blacksmiths in the shed. It keeps you busy keeping the tools sharp. Them edges don't last long on granite.

"The most money I ever made wasn't in stonesheds. It was during the big war. I went to work in the shipyards in Newark. I was a young fellow. I was making so much money

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I didn't know what to do with it. Fifteen dollars a day or more. Imagine that today! Now they want people to work a week for fifteen dollars. That's what I made. I worked with the riveters. Heating rivets, that was my job. You got to have them just the right heat. You ought to see them riveters handle rivets. White-hot and they toss them with plyers and catch them in buckets. You got to have a quick eye and a sure hand to play ball with hot rivets. You got to be tough building with steel. Sure, and you got to be tough working with granite, too.

"I like the granite business better. I feel more at home. They turn out fast work today in the sheds. It takes maybe three days to turn out a stone that used to take a week or more. Machinery has done that. In the quarries they have better machinery, too. 7 "It was tough for everybody in the early days. Lots of stonecutters die from the silica. Now they've got new and better equipment; they've all got to use the suctions. It helps a lot; but it ain't perfect. Men still die. You bet your life my kid don't go to work in no stonished. Silica, that's what kills them. Everybody who stays in granite, it gets... I don't get so much of it myself. Maybe I'm smart. I don't make so much money, but I don't get so much silica. In my end of the shed there ain't so much dust. I can laugh at the damn granite because it can't touch me. That's me. I ain't got no money, but I ain't got no silica either. My end of the shed don't get so much dust. It's like a knife, you know, that silica. Like a knife in your chest.

"I been laid off once in awhile, sure. The business is slow in winter. Last winter I didn't have no work. I drew my unemployment insurance money. That saved my life. I sold a little whisky and beer, too. Just to my friends on Sunday. I'm telling you, my kid ain't going without milk. Not if I have to get me a gun, he ain't going hungry. Well, we got by. We got along. In the spring I went back to the shed.

"When the big strike came in '22 I was just learning the blacksmith trade. Then with the strike I had to move away to get a job. No jobs here. Everybody out of work. When granite stops here everything stops. So I went back to Newark. That's where I got married. My

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wife was an Italian girl from Montpelier. I never met her up here. Had to go to Newark to find her, see? It's a funny thing.

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I was working in a hotel in Newark when I met her. We got married pretty quick. She came near being born on the boat, my wife. Her folks came over from Italy, too. She was born right after they got here to America. That was good luck. Her folks are dead now. My father and mother, too. By 1933 they are all dead... We get married eleven years before we have the kid. Long time to go without a child, huh? I'm glad because it's a boy. He's been sick but he's better now. He's pretty big and strong now, a good healthy boy. That's how I like him to be... I'm a Catholic; so is my wife. We used to go to church all the time. We still go, but not so much. Still we don't miss many Sundays.

"Sure, I have a good time here. Lots of good friends, you know. Sometimes we play that Italian game we call 'butch.' It's a funny name. It's some like bowling, but you play it outdoors. In the Old Country everybody played it. They brought the game over here with them. We play cards, sure. Lots of cards. Sometimes we play poker, just a small friendly game. Another game of cards we play is 'scoppa.' That's a nice game.

"I don't drink so much no more. Only Saturday nights sometimes. I like beer and whisky, sure. But 'vino,' that's my best drink. I like the wine. I don't like the grappa. Most Italians do, but not me. I'm a real Wop but I don't like the grappa. You have to drink some if you work with granite. The damn silica kills you anyway. All the stonecutters like to drink. Men that work hard like they work have to drink. They all die young. You're no 9 good to live if you live long enough with granite. They know what it is, the stonecutters. Like me, they might laugh at it. But they know...

"I'm in my forties now. But I ain't got much dust in my end of the shed. Not so much silica for me. If you want to make big money in granite you got to get silica. And that means you die young if you get enough.

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“But not me. No, no, no, not me. I don't die yet. I ain't got any money.”