

## [Veteran Italian Carver]

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### VETERAN ITALIAN CARVER

A handful of stonecutters, less fortunate than their steady working brothers, live in the dingy south-end settlement. [Goneroso?] Bonti sat old and brown on his granite doorstep, his shoulders protected by a patchwork quilt even though it was a warm July evening. A gray, tobacco stained moustache hung limp over his mouth. A middle-aged woman sat in the window darning socks. "The wife of my son," old Bonti explained. His voice was deep, a choked vibrancy that shook his difficult English speech into an almost unintelligible drone.

"My boy Elo is sixty-one. Me, I am 'bout eighty," he said. Forty-six year I work in stone - twenty-two in the old country, twenty-four over here. I stop work fifteen year ago. The rheumatis', it got me in the hands. See?" They were brown and gnarled, the little finger of the left hand crooked and grotesquely swollen from years of work. From chisel rubbing against flesh.

"I come over here in 1903. In the fall, almost winter it was. I leave Italy with the sun shining warm. I take the boat from France, the sky is blue and warm. I get to New York, it is cold and gray. And always rain. Rain. For two week it rain cold. I come with a fam'ly of four. The wife and two boys. Big boys, eighteen and twenty-one. The boys pay their own fare. I come from [Rioto?] in the Lazio country. 'Bout halfway 2 down the leg of Italy. I want to come, I come that's all. I guess I glad I come. Who can tell for sure?" He shrugged, and stared into the thickening dusk.

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“The younges' boy die long time ago. Only my son Elo left and his gran'children. Over there they play, over there near the river. Two of them, his own children, they [ard?] all dead. No good luck with them. One in a bootleg, he got kill in New York a few year ago. The rest—he have no good luck with them, neither.

“Elo is no longer in the shed. No more. The doctor say no.” Old Bonti tapped his chest. “A little sick here. Now, he work out whenever he can. A little. Not too hard work. Mostly W. P. A. Anyway, we live. Today he is up there over the hill to help a farmer. I dunno. They all go fast in this country. The children, and their own children. I guess we are make stronger in the old country. We last longer. Ha, old I am, but my health I guess it is better than Elo's.

“The first month I am here I think this Barre in a mad place. Dangerous. People hate each other because they do not think the same. Anarchists and Socialists, just like some places in Italy. It was that year, just the month before I got here that the man was kill. A stonecutter. Corti. I remember the talk. I remember better because Elo was just talk about it the other day. He see a picture in the paper. A picture of the Corti monument, and it make him think about it. The monument, like life it is. So real. Like this, with his chin in his hand, like be is think hard. Even the stonecuttt tools are there. His brother make that monument to him. A 3 good one. But not so good like that Burns Memorial that his brother help to make. One of the best in the country. All the time I have work in this country and in the old, I still say the Memorial in the best. The Scotchmen give it to Barre. But that memorial in City Park. That big granite man! Bah, no life that one's got. Nothing.

“Just the other day my boy is talk about Corti. It is on a Saturday night he is shot. The year I come here. 1903. They have a meeting that night. Socialists. But everyone, they are welcome. The paper say so. It to an Italian paper\* print in New York. It say a speaker will come to the meeting. Well, all the people are wait there, the speaker he does not come. Pretty soon they start to joke about it. They joke too much. Some got mad. This Garetto, he is a blacksmith, he go to the door and he shoot the one who is near him. It is Corti.

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Corti die. Garetto is in jail ten year. When he come back Barre is against him, so he go back to Italy.

"The granite business is change. Back when I do my best work I do it all by hand. The chisel. No machinery. Machinery make the work fast. But it cut out the men. I remember what they say when they start to put in the machines. The Union, they say, 'This is better. This way if the machine break we throw it out or we fix it. It in easier to fix a machine than a man.' Maybe they are right. It does not look like they will fix Elo. He was never strong like me. But it make no difference how strong you are sometimes. Dust is dust.

\* Il Proletario, a daily socialist paper published in New York. Meeting had been advertised by the Editor, G. M. Serati. 4 Not so many got sick in the old country. Always fresh air around you, no walls. No need for the sponge mask around the nose like we wear here before they got the machinery to suck away the dust. Bah, those mask almost choke the breath in you! I wear one five minute, then I throw it away. If they would work here only in the summer, in the open shed like in the old country, and pay the men double, it would be fine.

"Over there I carve all by hand. I learn it from my father. Just before I come to America I carve the best piece of my life. A little [Baubino?] the One you see at Christmas in the crib. Everything is fine, fine — the nose, the mouth, the little fingers. I get much praise for that work, and when I hear they need good carvers in Barre. I think sure I will become the great artista in America and make plenty money. I come. Twenty year before, there is only 100 men to cut stone in Barre; in 1903 there is twenty time that. Three year before I get here they build the railroad through Barre. That help boost the granite business. More men come. Italian. Scotch. Spanish. Irish. The track to the quarry go up 1000 feet above Barre. The steepest one here in the east. I used to see fifteen, twenty flat car come down three time a days heavy with granite. A special engine it had. It push the load uphill; when it come down the engine is first to hold it back easy. The road was make like a V to help the heavy load."

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Old Bonti drew the quilt closer. "I never become the great artista. My hands — the rheumatis'. Sometime I think they get stiff because here the dirt floor in the shed is always wet to hold down the dust. I dunno. Anyway, I do a few 5 good piece. A cross with a fine Christ on it. In a Burlington cemetery that one is. My fingers got stiff 'bout the time they got the pneumatic tools. I like to know it is my own strength that make the beauty in stone, not the power of air. Maybe if I really learn to use the pneumatic tools I would not say that. I dunno.

"Four day my Elo work this week, and today on the farm. Not much. Today they strike in every business. Wednesday night they have a meeting in the park. WPA meeting. Elo, he go down, too. He say there is one hundred and fifty there. Good talk, he say. Some of the top Union men are there. The mayor, no. But he send a letter that say the WPA does good work and he in satisfy with it. Only few at the meeting because there is too much go on that night. A picnic at Berlin Pond. The Italian Pleasure Club. Almost one hundred and seventy go to that. I guess they like better to eat chicken and polenta than to listen to WPA talk. Elo does not belong to the Club. Once he does. It cost too much. He is ask to go, to take care of the fire. But no, he like better to go to this meeting."