

[The Boccinis are Good Marriers]

Mary Tomasi Recorded Writers' Section Files

DATE: JUL [3 1940?] Men Against Granite

"THE BOCCINIS ARE COOL MARRIERS"

I got only two rooms," Steve Boccini says. It is not an apology. He rubs the swollen, chisel-distorted knuckle of his little finger against the gray stubble of his chin; a calloused index finger caresses a heavy moustache. His dark eyes travel the combination kitchen-living, and bedroom. "What use I got for more?" he asks. "There's only me here."

Steve Boccini's apartment is on the second floor of the Palingetti block on Main Street. At night red neon lights from the beer garden across the street flood the walls. Tonight a baby was whimpering upstairs in lazy, self-amusement that promised to keep up indefinitely. Across the hall came the rattle and splash of supper dishes drowned occasionally in a blare of radio music.

"Every two, three days my daughter comes up to clean," Boccini said. "She come this morning to do the washing. When I come home tonight I find it out on the porch line, almost frozen. I take it in right away, wet or no, I don't care. I hang it here by the radiator. Better to have it drip a little water in here tonight an' have the clothes nice an' warm to put on in the morning. No cold underwear for me. Not me!"

Two pairs of heavy underwear and a few dark shirts were draped over chairs. Large red handkerchiefs and woolen socks hissed a moist heat over the radiator.

"I don't like that my daughter bother to come here to clean," Boccini continued. "She's got enough work to do at her own place with two babies."

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I say to her, 'Look, Lola, I earn pretty good money in the shed. I can pay to have someone come to do the cleaning.' But, no. She want to come herself." The dark eyes smiled.

"Guess she don't trust me. She's afraid I will marry again. The men in my family are good marriers from 'way back many years. Take my father. He's alive now with the third wife. No, no divorce. No divorce. The women they all two died from honest sickness. One when she is having a baby, the other from something here in her chest.

"I was 21 years old when I leave the old country, an' my father is fresh married then for two weeks. Younger than me, my stepmother is. An' she's got children younger than mine. My father, he don't bother to write to me no more. But her, she writes once in a while. Near Alessandria they live, up in the north of Italy. A small place. They tell me that now they got a hospital there, an' more stores. I have a letter only last week from my stepmother. She says the flat fields beyond the school is made into a big air base, an' all round it are camps of soldiers. Right there is the natural, easy path to get to France an' Germany, an' they got to be ready in case of war. Dio, it's hard to believe they are all waiting for war excitement to come to them. Everything used to be so quiet. " Now if Italy goes to war all that north country will be spoiled. All the homes, the farm land, an' the roads. An' they tell me all good new roads have been built. I was in service under the red, white an' green flag in Tripoli for three months. Just three months. The climate was no good for me. Too hot. All the time we march an' march the border. The 3 food would spoil an' it seemed we was getting rotten, too. Sometimes it seemed like I couldn't breath, so they sent me home.

"War is bad business. My father used to say it was like thunder. It happens in the sky, one big noise, an' the houses feel it an' shake even for miles away. We feel this war over here across the ocean. Right here in Barre we feel it, an' it's lucky for us it is a good feeling. It will help the granite business plenty. Already the sheds are getting more orders for memorials. Back a few years the granite business begin to slide down fast because it was cheaper to buy the memorials from Finland an' Sweden. I remember in '36 the duty on

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the imported stuff dropped 'way down from twenty-five cents a cubic foot, to twelve-and-a half. When you figure that the men over there they work for only \$2.00 a day, - well, you can see how they can sell below our price. But now all that is changing. The war is doing it. The duty is shooting right up again. An' cargo insurance, too. An' the ships that dare to cross the ocean would rather carry something that's got more value than heavy stone. Our granite sheds ought to go full blast this year. I don't care so much for myself. There's only me to take care of, an' I make enough for that even when I'm laid off a few days. Tell you the truth, I am glad for a few slack days in the winter. It gives me the chance to go hunting. That's the only good sport for me. The last few weeks I got so many rabbits an' partridges I don't remember how many. Mostly I give them away. I don't like to bother to do a big cooking. Mostly I give them to the woman across the hall, an' when they're cooked I eat them with her.” Again Steve Boccini's 4 dark eyes crinkled and smiled. Two small children she's got an' her husband is dead. I guess that's what my daughter is scared for. That I'll get married again. Dio, she don't have to get scared. A [plate?] of rabbit stew an' Polenta, well, it's rabbit stew an' polenta, but no more marrying for me.

“My shotgun, I been using that now quite a few weeks. But the rifle I just take it out last night to clean it. See -“Boccini pointed to a corner where rifle and shotgun stood side by side stock end down. “I got that shotgun now for twenty year, an' I wouldn't trade her for the best one you can buy in any stare. Already she's got me [a?] mine deer. Next week's the deer season. I wish it would snow. That's the sport, that's the fun — to track the deer. This year four of us will go up Groton way to a camp. With this weather I guess we can go all the way by car. Sometimes in the middle of the winter when the snow is too high me have to leave the car at a farmhouse. Then we got to get out an' walk two miles to the camp. We find the camp cold, so the first night we drink plenty of wine. But after that just a few swallows to keep warm. You have to keep your head to be a good hunter.

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“When my kids are small an' I have my own house, always I keep a good rabbit dog. Lost the Italians here got hunting dogs. But to keep one here in these two rooms, no, no. A rabbit dog is made to be out in the air, not to be shut in.

“Deer hunting is a fine sport, but the season is too short. Now rabbits, those we hunt a long time. An' it's a fine sport, too. The devils is hard to catch. In the fall they got color like a mouse an' 5 they look like the dry leaves on the ground. In the winter they're almost white like the snow and hard to see. All those animals we hunt got a way to protect themselves. You take when we hunt the pheasant in the fall. Ha, that's the hard sport, - they got the pretty, bright colors just like the leaves they are hiding in. Sometimes you think they are a part of the bush. Smart, too, those birds. The bright colored ones, they get brave, an' sit there in the bright leaves just like they are laughing at you because you can't see them. An' the ones with the faded color, they're smart, too. They hide 'way down the bottom of the bush so you can't see them.”

Steve Boccini bent his stocky back to tug at the lacings of his heavy shoes. As he stooped the words came in grunts. “Excuse me, yes, if I take off my shoes? I wear these all day on a hard cement floor, an' at night my toes, they are always happy to get loose. Some of the sheds got just dirt floors sprinkled with water to hold the dust down. But we are lucky to have a cement floor in our shed. The dirt floor is easy on the feet but bad on the rheumatism.” He pulled off his shoes and wriggled the woolen toes in relief. Suddenly he pulled himself up in his chair and laughed loud and long. “Every time I talk about hunting I got to tell what my boy do when he was a little fellow. All he think about then is hunting, just like his father. He was crazy for guns, him an' the other kids he played with. Me, well, I guess I was born with a gun in my hands. I figure any boy is safe with a gun so long he's got sense. But my wife, no, she always tell the boy: wait till you grow up... So one day when he tease an' tease to go rabbit hunting I tell him a story how I used to get rabbits in the old country without a gun. I tell him 6 just for fun.

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"I tell him like this; look Jo-Jo, a smart boy, he don't need no gun for rabbits. In the old country I used to start out in the morning, no gun in my hand, only a big sack. When I come back at night the sack is full of rabbits. Every one at home calls me a good hunter an' I laugh to myself because I know I catch them without work an' without spending one penny for bullets. This is how I do it. First, I find a path in the woods where I know the rabbits will run, an' at the end of the path just in front of a big, hard tree I build a little stone wall. Then I take a big cloth with bushes painted on it, an' I nail it in front of the tree. I tell the boy who is with me to go back in the woods an' scare the rabbits out. Pretty soon they come hopping out, one, two three, four rabbits. They hop fast up the path. They see the cloth with the painted bushes, an' they think to jump the wall an' hide themselves in the bushes. But when they jump they strike the heads on the hard tree, an' they fall down, knocked out, almost like dead. An' there I am behind the wall with the sack wide open, ready to pick up the rabbits an' stick them in. So, Jo-Jo, what you think now about your old man? A good way to hunt. The easy way to get rabbits, no?"

"That's the story I tell my boy one night. I think no more about it till pretty soon in three, four days the teacher meet my wife down the street an' she ask her why Jo-Jo is not in school for two days, an' if he is sick.

"Well, anyway, we find out that Jo-Jo has believed my story, an' he has been going to the woods with another boy for two days to get rabbits." 7 Steve Boccini's rambling laugh filled the room. "Ha, I think it is a good joke. I tell all my friends about it. " But my wife, she did not think it was funny. Never again have I seen her so mad. Not so mad at Jo-Jo, it's me she's mad at. 'The boy, he don't know no better,' she say. 'But you, Steve, you're the old fool.' She's mad because the boy he has take the two best sheets she's got in the house. Sheets all pretty with embroidery, an' on these Jo-Jo has painted big bushes. They're no good no more, an' next day my wife she is expecting her sister an' children from Highgate for a visit. She say for over a week, she has thought how she will show off with those pretty sheets. Now they are spoil. That's why she is mad. Well, I try to please her. I go

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out an' buy the two best sheets I can find. They haven't got embroidery, but they're good sheets. It don't do no good. Dio, for a whole month she is mad.

“Jo-Jo was a little fellow then. Now he is out in Kansas City in a meat packing place. Once in a while when he come home for a visit I ask him to come hunting with me. But no, he say he sees no more fun in it. So much dead meat he sees out there where he is working that he gets no more fun in hunting. Jo-Jo is a fine big man now. Bigger than me. Five years he's been gone from home. This summer he got married. He sent me a picture of the girl. A plain face she's got, but she looks like she's got sense. Jo-Jo needs someone like that. Always he does things in a hurry, always he never thinks twice. He says maybe he will come to visit next summer. Not here with me. I got only room for myself. But they can stay with my daughter Lola. They are a good brother an' sister, they get along fine together. 8 “I got more children. I got two more boys from another wife. Those two are in New Hampshire. One has got work in a mill. The other, well, he's got no steady work. He does whatever he can find, an' he picks up a little money at night. He plays the violin in a pretty good orchestra. The boys get along good with Jo-Jo an' Lola, they're nice to each other, but they don't bother to visit.

“I was married three times, just like my father. My first wife, she lived only four months after we are married. The doctor, he say it was poison from mushrooms that we picked in the woods. But me, I find it hard to believe. I eat the mushrooms, too, that day, an' I never feel even a bellyache. All the years I pick an' eat mushrooms, I never find one that made me sick. Look, I even eat those that my wife picked a few days before she died. She dried them out in the sun so they will keep. I even eat those, an' I'm not scared to die. I know the mushrooms. I know the good an' the bad.

“My second wife is a woman I used to know in the old country. She come over here with her brother. I have quite a time to marry her. Her family, they write to her for a long time

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an' beg her not to marry me. They tell her no woman is lucky to marry a Boccini man. I guess maybe they are right. Anyway, my wifes, they all died.