BOCCIA DUEL

By ALESSANDRO PAVOLINI

ALESSANDRO Pavolini joined the Fascist Party in 1921, when he was eighteen, and became Party Secretary for Florence while still in his twenties. Having fought as a volunteer in the Abyssinian war in 1936, he was Italy’s Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda from 1938 to 1943 and then Editor of Rome’s leading newspaper “Il Messaggero.” Arrested by Badoglio, he was freed by the Germans and is now Secretary General of the Party and one of the closest collaborators of the Duce. But apart from all this, Pavolini is regarded as one of the outstanding authors of Fascist Italy.

WHEN Pirro and Ermete played Boccia, the whole village of Due Vie stood around the alley looking on. Is Due Vie really a village? It might be more correct to say: a zone, a shallow valley of vineyards, fields, and peach orchards. Only down at the bottom, where the due vie, the two roads, meet, cottages squat a little closer together. There is a well there, too, stables for the cattle, and two gas stations, but most important of all there is the tobacco agency of Ulpiano with a bar and a boccia alley.

Although Pirro and Ermete had known each other from birth, they would never use the familiar “thou” when speaking to each other. They had never lacked motives for secret disputes; they always managed to find some slight pretext for open and emphatic hostility. Typical was the affair of the famous range of hills of Pomentino, on which (for reasons which, in spite of lengthy discussion in Due Vie, have always remained a mystery) the peaches achieve a more exquisite fragrance than anywhere else. In this dispute, Pirro had been the victor. Now he owned Pomentino after having fought his way through an intricate and beautifully confused network of mortgages, loans, and marriages to its possession. On another occasion concerning the group of houses at the crossroads and Ulpiano’s shop, it was Ermete who had succeeded by a masterpiece of trickery in the board of directors of the Agricultural Bank in acquiring the desirable property for himself.

In this way they had gradually—for the most part turn and turn about—divided up among themselves all that was valuable in Due Vie: the fertile tracts, the mill, the clay pit, the concession for the two gas stations, and the insurance agencies. To the unfortunate landowners they had squeezed out, they gave loans, rented out threshing machines, and sold fertilizer and ferments. Only Ulpiano’s inn was able to hold its own, so that it was considered a neutral ground on which the two adversaries could meet. Otherwise, all the village inhabitants had more or less to pay tribute to the two.

For a Pirro, this was an astonishing achievement in life. He was the son of an estate manager; having become an estate manager himself, he ended up by gradually buying out his master and moving into the latter’s villa. Ermete had started out as a sexton in a small convent. Then he rose to the ownership of the convent vegetable garden until he got the administration and later the whole convent into his hands. He turned it into a rest home for tired old ladies.

Maybe their wealth was very modest, judged by the standards of rich townspeople. But to amass this fortune in that little corner of the world, among parsimonious people living one on top of the other, needed the same tenacity and cunning as a Morgan or a Rockefeller had needed for scraping together their riches in America.

However, the horizon of their world still was the Pomentino range. It was not modesty but pride which kept them from looking beyond: as long as they remained in Due Vie, they were sure to remain the first. They did not run after the greater, more remote possibilities. That would have meant for each of them to leave the field to the other and to acknowledge the victory of the other side. They preferred not to give way an inch: they were chained together by greed and envy, but also by an almost artistic passion which forced them constantly to challenge each other or get the better of the other with a dry pleasure. But in addition to this they were also bound to the world of Due Vie by the perfume of the peaches and grapes.
It is for such natures that the boccia bowls seem to have been created. The idea of the game is to drive out one's partner from his position and to place oneself there. In playing boccia, the greatest thrill is not so much one's own victory as the defeat of the other fellow. Those heavy, dried-out, cracked wooden balls are your means, the cards of your game, the artillery of your campaign. You must try to build them around the little ball, the boccino, known also as the "little chap." When you have encircled the "little chap," you have won.

But, my dear fellow, now it's my turn. Watch my bowl speeding along, a nice, round, innocent thing. Listen how lightly it hits the ground: you are right, perhaps with a slightly hollow, spiteful thud. But how lightly it rolls along, how innocently it approaches the side of the alley, so innocently, as if it were not at all concerned with the alley, as if its urge for freedom were driving it out of the alley into the tomatoes. Surely my bowl has no designs whatever upon your troops. But what is it doing now? It is whizzing along the edge of the alley like a racing cyclist in the curve of the race track. And now—but that is not possible!—yes, now it is crashing right into your position, by mere chance, of course (but listen how gleefully it hands out dry cracks on all sides). Strange, now it is actually pushing your men away; they have suddenly become quite harmless. But my bowl is giving the "little chap" one last little dig in the side, which sounds to you like a toast to your health, and then it settles down right beside him.

The onlookers stood admiring this game—in that double obsequiousness they owed their lords and masters. More and more people gathered around Ulpiano's boccia alley; for, beside everything else, this game took for them the place of the theater and movies, of which there were none in Due Vie anyway.

But a game is always also a theater performance. For the villagers the boccia alley became, during those rare matches between Ermete and Pirro, the village itself, the valley itself. The wooden planks bordered the alley just as the slopes of the hills bordered the valley; the bowls lay there in all their fat glory as did the melons and pumpkins all over the valley. The two cutthroats, finally, fought there with their throws for the space around the "little chap" just as otherwise they rolled their money for a farm.

ONE fine evening in spring a very natural, but nevertheless very exciting thing happened.

Up till then, Viola Ulpiano had been for all guests at the inn just a little girl; a skinny little tree without fruit, at most with a hint of that tartness which gives an inkling more of the stone than of the juice.

In the valley of the peaches, however, a single season is all that is needed to ripen to maturity. One day Viola put on for the first time a very thin pink blouse, and that suddenly made the fact of her maturity evident. Over night it had become an obvious reality which everyone perceived, as if the light had suddenly been switched on. In the heart of Due Vie a woman had flared up like a light.

So attractive, so desirable did she suddenly seem to the people of Due Vie that they immediately went on to think, although really against their own will: Ermete and Pirro must fight it out for this girl.

And indeed, from now on the two bachelors came more often to Ulpiano's shop; with loud voices they would remark in passing on the charms of the time of betrothal and of married life. As usual, here again the intentions of one goaded on those of the other. Both of them, however, were in a certain hurry, as countless young fellows from the neighborhood were also already buzzing around the girl.

Moreover, these young men were not nearly as respectful toward wealth as were their fathers, uncles, grandfathers, or other older people of Due Vie. These young men had grown up in times of strife and had seen something of the world. They played their games no longer at the boccia alley of Due Vie but at the stadium in the city. And when one of the two great rivals appeared at Viola Ulpiano's, these young fellows did not regard it at all as their duty to stand back respectfully like their fathers.

Viola, incidentally, by no means disdained the two village grandees. She smiled just as sweetly at the ex sexton as at the tenant's son; but she also smiled at the young fellows. She smiled almost all the time, perhaps because she had good teeth; perhaps also because, by stimulating a little jealousy, she hoped to accelerate the declarations of the two suitors. The older villagers, who had already made high bets on Viola's choice, praised this feminine strategy as wise.

It was on a Sunday that Ermete and Pirro unexpectedly met right in front of the girl. The conversation among the three was leavened with slight hints which were directed at a formal demand for Viola's decision. But instead of waiting for this decision, Ermete suddenly proposed to his rival a game on the boccia alley, to take place a week from then. There was of course, no direct connection between this challenge and the preceding conversation. So the boccia game was not in the least to be played for Viola. Nevertheless, there was a crowd lining the boccia alley on the following
Sunday. The old people were assembled in full. And when the "little chap" rolled lightly on to the hard-beaten ground and lay there in the alley to give a meaning to the whole game, they all looked at it with a certain amount of irony mixed partly with tenderness, partly with regret, because everybody present thought of the pretty girl's fate.

It happened to be an afternoon late in July, hot, and never ending. Pirro squatted in his shirt sleeves on the grass embankment, sweating like anything. But when he wanted to place his bowls near the "little chap," he could make his paws look wicked, tender, or exquisite—as the instant demanded. Pale, slim Ermeto, on the other hand, applied to his shots, aimed at blasting away his opponent, that furious but steady power with which as a boy he had pulled at the bell ropes for the Angelus.

The crushed old people, who followed the game with humility and admiration, thought that the two were courageous, shrewd, and dominating. How nobly they were combating for that last, perfect spice of their wealth that was to give meaning to their life and a content to their life's work!

Ulpiano went back and forth with the drinks, frequently serving himself, too. He looked a little depressed. Was it the alcohol? Oh no, he was only thinking about his Viola, who was so soon to leave his house. After all, that is no small matter for a father. Viola herself was not to be seen. Such restraint and bashfulness were still appreciated in Due Vie!

But toward evening Ulpiano could simply not stand it any longer. He confided to the postman that Viola had already run away early in the morning, with "one of those fellows there."

"I am desperate," Ulpiano sobbed, moved to tears by his dejection. But then it was probably more the wine than Viola which was to blame for this dejection.

Now the postman told everybody the news "in strict confidence." He carried it from ear to ear, just as otherwise he carried his post cards from door to door. When the game approached its end, when Pirro and Ermete were playing the most difficult, indeed, the decisive round of their lives, everybody knew already what had actually happened.

And this common secret was laid like a disenchanting chain around the vain suspense of the two unsuspecting players. It made their wild gestures roll out senselessly into a vacuum, like the gesticulations of rustic actors before a cruel, sophisticated metropolitan public.

The two combatants seemed strangely aged to the onlookers; almost in a Hash people noticed all the wrinkles in their faces. The two, however, kept on staring at the "little chap" as if it were made of gold, and in their eyes dwelt the greed and rivalry of two lives. Silently the onlookers were anticipating the moment in which the two would finally realize that in reality all their desperate struggle had been aimed at nothing more than the maltreatment of a little ball of cracked wood, a worn-out ball of no value whatever.

Nevertheless, what remained of this event was something important: the delicious feeling of general revenge.

The bowls rolled on, while evening shadows came to nest in the valley. The sun threw one last ray at the royal peaches of Pomentino, but then it rapidly disappeared from the valley of Due Vie. But it gilded the plain beyond the range of hills for a few minutes longer, as a salute to the pretty fugitive, who laughed more gaily that evening than ever before.

---

**BOOK REVIEW**

*Le Néolithique de la Chine* (The Neolithic Period of China), by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Pei Wen-Chung. (Peking, 1944, Institut de Géobiologie, 100 pp., 2 maps.)

With its 100 pages, 48 illustrations, and 2 maps, this French work provides a clear picture of all that is known so far about the neolithic period of China. Hence it should prove a welcome publication not only for experts but also for the layman. The work touches on so many sides of the subject that it is impossible for us to review them in detail here. There is a misprint on page 85, however, which we must point out: according to the *Hongkong Naturalist* (1932-1936), the archaeological discoveries on Lamma Island were made by Pére D. J. Finn, not by P. Flynn. — Dr. H. Hone.