



IT was the fifteenth of June in 1767 when Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò, my brother, sat among us for the last time. I remember as if it were today. We were in the dining room of our villa in Ombrosa, the windows framing the thick branches of the great holm oak in the park. It was midday, and our family, following the old custom, sat down to dinner at that hour, even though among the nobility it was now the fashion, inspired by the late-rising court of France, to dine in the middle of the afternoon. The wind was blowing in from the sea, I remember, and the leaves were stirring. Cosimo said, 'I told you I don't want it, and I don't!' and he pushed away the plate of snails. Never had such grave disobedience been seen.

At the head of the table was the Baron Arminio Piovasco di Rondò, our father, wearing his wig long over his ears in the style of Louis XIV, out of fashion in this as in so many of his habits. Between me and my brother sat the Abbé Fauchelafleur, our family's almoner and the tutor of us boys. Across from us was the Generalessa Corradina di Rondò, our mother, and our sister, Battista, the house nun.

At the other end of the table, opposite our father, sat, dressed in the Turkish style, the Cavalier Avvocato Enea Silvio Carrega, the administrator and hydraulic engineer of our estates, and, as the illegitimate brother of our father, our natural uncle.

Several months earlier, when Cosimo turned twelve and I eight, we had been admitted to our parents' table, or, rather, I had benefited prematurely from my brother's promotion, so that I wouldn't be left to eat alone. I say benefited only as a manner of speaking: in reality for both Cosimo and me the happy times were over, and we felt regret for the meals in our little room, the two of us alone with the Abbé Fauchelafleur. The abbé was a withered, wrinkled old man, who had a reputation as a Jansenist and had in fact fled the Dauphiné, his native land, to avoid a trial by the Inquisition. But the strict character that was usually praised by everyone, the inward severity that he imposed on himself and others, constantly yielded to a fundamental inclination to apathy and indifference, as if his long meditations, eyes staring into emptiness, had led only to a great boredom and lethargy, and in even the least effort he saw the sign of a destiny that it was useless to oppose. Our meals in the company of the abbé began after long prayers, with orderly, decorous, silent movements of spoons, and woe to you if you raised your eyes from the plate or made even the slightest sucking sound as you sipped the broth. But by the end of the soup the abbé was tired, bored; he gazed into space and clicked his tongue at every swallow of wine, as if only the most superficial and transient sensations could reach him. By the main course we had already started eating with our fingers, and we finished

our meal throwing pear cores at each other while the abbé every so often let out a lazy *'Ooo bien! ... Ooo alors!'*

Now, instead, as we dined with the family, childhood's sad chapter of daily grievances took shape. Our father and our mother were always right in front of us; we had to use knives and forks for the chicken, and sit up straight, and keep elbows off the table – endless! – and then there was our odious sister Battista. A succession of scoldings, spiteful acts, punishments, obstinacies began, until the day Cosimo refused the snails and decided to separate his lot from ours.

I became aware of this accumulation of family resentments only later; I was just eight then, everything seemed to me a game, the battle of us children against the adults was the battle that all children fight. I didn't understand that my brother's determination concealed something deeper.

Our father, the baron, was a dull man certainly, although not a bad one: dull because his life was dominated by thoughts that were out of step, as often happens in eras of transition. In many people the unrest of the age instills a need to become restless as well, but in the wrong direction, on the wrong track; so our father, despite what was brewing at the time, laid claim to the title of Duke of Ombrosa and thought only of genealogies and successions and rivalries and alliances with potentates near and far.

Thus at our house we always lived as if at the dress rehearsal of an invitation to court, I don't know whether the Empress of Austria's or King Louis's, or maybe that of the mountain nobles of Turin. A turkey was served, and our father watched to see that we carved it and picked off the meat according to all the royal rules, while the abbé

barely tasted it, in order not to be caught out, he who had to support our father's reprimands. As for the Cavalier Avvocato Carrega, then, we had discovered the deceitful depths of his heart: into the folds of his Turkish robes entire thighs vanished, which he could take bites of later as he liked, hiding in the vineyard; and we would have sworn (although his movements were so swift that we never managed to catch him in the act) that he came to the table with a pocketful of bones already picked, to leave on his plate in place of the turkey quarters that had vanished whole. Our mother, the *generalessa*, didn't count, because she had brusque military manners even when she helped herself at the table – '*So, Noch ein wenig! Gut!*' – and no one objected; but with us she insisted, if not on etiquette, on discipline, and backed up the baron with her parade-ground orders – '*Sitz ruhig! And wipe your nose!*' The only one who was at her ease was Battista, the house nun, who stripped the flesh off fowl with a minute persistence, fiber by fiber, using some sharp knives that only she had, something like a surgeon's lancets. The baron, who should have held her up as an example, didn't dare to look at her, because with those mad eyes under the wings of her starched cap, the teeth clenched in that yellow mouselike face, she frightened even him. So you can see how the table was the place where all the antagonisms emerged, the incompatibilities among us, along with all our follies and hypocrisies, and how it was at the table, precisely, that Cosimo's rebellion was determined. That's why I'm describing all this at length, since there will be no more elaborately laid tables in my brother's life, you can be sure.

It was also the only place where we encountered the adults. For the rest of the day our mother withdrew into her rooms to make lace and embroidery and filet, because in truth the *generalessa* was able to attend only to this traditional women's work, and only here could she vent her warrior passion. The lace and embroidery usually represented geographic maps, and having laid them out on pillows or tapestries, our mother dotted them with pins and little flags, marking the battlefields of the Wars of Succession, which she knew thoroughly. Or she embroidered cannons, with the various trajectories taking off from the gun, and the firing brackets, and the angles of projection, because she was an expert in ballistics, and further had at her disposal the entire library of her father the general, with treatises on the military art and shooting tables, and atlases. Our mother was a Von Kurtewitz: Konradine, the daughter of General Konrad von Kurtewitz, who, commanding the troops of Maria Theresa of Austria, had occupied our lands twenty years earlier. She was motherless, and the general brought her along to the camp; nothing adventurous – they traveled well equipped, lodged in the best castles, with a host of servants, and she spent the days making pillow lace. The stories told, that she, too, went into battle, on horseback, are all legends; she had always been a small woman with rosy skin and a turned-up nose, as we remember her, but that paternal military passion had stayed with her, maybe in protest against her husband.

Our father was among the few nobles in our area who had allied themselves with the empire in that war: he had welcomed General von Kurtewitz into his domain with open arms, had put his men at the general's disposition, and, to

better demonstrate his dedication to the imperial cause, had married Konradine, all in the eternal hope for the dukedom, and that went badly for him, too, as usual, because the Austrians soon moved out and the Genoese burdened him with taxes. But he had gained a fine spouse, the *generalessa*, as she was called after her father died on the expedition to Provence, and Maria Theresa sent her a gold choker on a damask pillow – a spouse with whom he almost always agreed, even if she, reared in military camps, dreamed only of armies and battles and reproached him for being nothing but an unsuccessful schemer.

But in essence they had both remained in the era of the Wars of Succession, she with artillery in her head, he with genealogical trees; she who dreamed for us children a rank in an army, it didn't matter which, he who saw us instead married to some grand duchess elector of the empire ... Despite all this, they were excellent parents, but so distracted that the two of us were left to grow up almost on our own. Was it a bad thing or good? Who can say? Cosimo's life was so far out of the ordinary, mine so orderly and modest, and yet our childhood was spent together, both of us indifferent to the adults' obsessions, as we sought pathways different from those trodden by other people.

We climbed the trees (these first innocent games are now charged in my memory with the light of initiation, of premonition; but who would have thought of it then?), we followed the streams, jumping from rock to rock, we explored caves on the seashore, we slid down the marble banisters of the staircases in the villa. One of Cosimo's most serious reasons for clashing with our parents had its origin

in one of these slides, because he was punished – unjustly, he thought – and from then on harbored a rancor against the family (or society? or the world in general?) that was later expressed in his decision of June fifteenth.

We had already been warned against sliding down the marble banister, to tell the truth, not out of fear that we would break a leg or an arm, because our parents never worried about that, and that's why – I think – we never broke anything, but because as we got bigger and heavier, we might knock down the statues of our ancestors that our father had had placed on the bottom pilasters of the banisters on every flight of stairs. In fact, Cosimo had already caused a great-great-grandfather bishop to tumble, miter and all; he was punished, and from then on he learned to brake a moment before reaching the bottom of the stairs and jump down, a hairsbreadth from crashing into the statue. I, too, learned, because I followed him in everything, except that I, always more modest and prudent, jumped off halfway down the staircase, or slid down bit by bit, braking constantly. One day he went down the banister like an arrow, and who was coming up the stairs! The Abbé Fauchelaffeur, strolling with his breviary open before him but with his gaze fixed on nothing, like a hen. If only he had been half asleep as usual! No, it was one of those moments that came even to him, of extreme attention, of alarm at all things. He sees Cosimo, he thinks, 'Banister, statue, now he'll bang into it, now they'll scold me, too' (because for every one of our pranks he, too, was scolded, as not knowing how to monitor us), and he flings himself on the banister to stop my brother. Cosimo collides with the abbé, sweeps him down the banister (he was



a tiny old man, all skin and bones), can't brake, crashes into the statue of our ancestor Cacciaguerra Piovasco, a Crusader in the Holy Land, and they all collapse at the foot of the stairs, the Crusader in fragments (he was of plaster), the abbé, and him. There were endless reprimands, whippings, extra exercises, confinement with bread and cold soup. And Cosimo, who felt innocent because the fault was not his but the abbé's, came out with that fierce invective: 'I don't care a bit about your ancestors, Father, sir!' The announcement of his vocation as a rebel.

Our sister did the same, in essence. Even though the isolation in which she lived had been imposed by our father after the affair of the young Marquis della Mela, she had always been a rebellious and solitary soul. How that business of the young marquis had happened we never knew. How had the son of a family hostile to us sneaked into the house? And why? To seduce, in fact to assault, our sister, it was said, in the long fight between the families that ensued. In fact, we could never imagine that freckled simpleton as a seducer, and still less of our sister, who was certainly stronger than him, and famous for arm wrestling even with the stable boys. And then, why was it he who cried out? And how in the world did the servants, hurrying, along with our father, find him with his pants in shreds, ripped as if by the claws of a female tiger? The Della Melas would never admit that their son had made an attempt on Battista's honor and agree to marriage. So our sister ended up buried at home, in a nun's habit, without having taken the vows even of a tertiary, given her dubious vocation.

Her unhappy soul revealed itself above all in the kitchen. She was a really skilled cook, because she had both diligence and imagination, prime talents of every cook, but when she put her hands to something you never knew what surprises might arrive at the table: once she had prepared some crostini, very refined, in fact, with pâté of mouse liver, and she told us only when we had eaten them and found them good; not to mention the locusts' legs, the hard, serrated back ones, set like a mosaic on a cake, and the pig tails roasted as if they were ring cakes, and the time she cooked a whole porcupine, with all its spines, who knows why, surely just to shock us when she raised the cover of the dish, because while she always ate whatever type of thing she prepared, not even she wanted to taste this, despite its being a young porcupine, pink and certainly tender. In fact, much of this horrible cooking was attempted only for show rather than for the pleasure of making us taste, along with her, foods with ghastly flavors. These dishes of Battista's were products of the finest animal or vegetable filigree work: heads of cauliflower with rabbit ears set on a collar of rabbit skin, or the head of a pig from whose mouth a red lobster emerged, as if the pig were expelling the tongue, and the lobster held the pig's tongue in its claws as if it had torn it out. Then the snails: she had managed to decapitate I don't know how many snails and had stuck each of the heads – those very soft little horses' heads – on a cream puff, I think with a toothpick, and when they came to the table they looked like a flock of tiny swans. And even more shocking than the sight of those delicacies was the thought of the zealous persistence that Battista certainly had put into preparing them, and

the image of her slender hands as they dismembered those small animal bodies.

The way the snails excited the macabre imagination of our sister drove us, my brother and me, to a rebellion, made up of solidarity with the poor tortured beasts, disgust for the taste of the cooked snails, and impatience with everything and everyone, and so it's not surprising if, starting there, Cosimo developed his act and what followed from it.

We had made a plan. When the *cavalier avvocato* brought home a basketful of edible snails, they were put in a barrel in the cellar so that they would fast, eating only bran, and would be purged. If you shifted the wooden cover of this barrel a kind of inferno appeared, where the snails were moving up the staves at a slow pace that was a premonition of their death agony, among bits of bran, stripes of clotted opaque slime, and colored snail excrement, memory of the good times of open air and grasses. Some of the snails were outside their shells, heads extended and horns spread, some huddled up in themselves, with only distrustful antennae sticking out; others were in small groups like neighbors, others asleep and closed up, others dead, with the shell upturned. To save them from encountering that sinister cook and to save us from her banquets, we made a hole in the bottom of the barrel and from there, using crushed blades of grass and honey, marked out a route, as hidden as possible behind casks and tools in the cellar, to draw the snails along the pathway of flight, up to a window that opened onto an untended and scrubby flower bed.

The next day, when we went down to the cellar to check the effects of our plan and in the light of a candle inspected

the walls and the passageways – ‘One here! And another here!’ ‘And see where this one got to!’ – already a line of snails was moving at small intervals from the barrel to the window along the floor and the walls, following our track. ‘Quick, snails! Hurry up, escape!’ we couldn’t keep ourselves from saying to them, seeing the creatures going so slowly, and not without detouring in idle circles on the cellar’s rough walls, attracted by occasional deposits and molds and encrustations. But the cellar was dark, cluttered, uneven; we hoped that no one would discover them, that they would all have time to escape.

Instead, that restless soul our sister Battista used to spend the night hunting mice throughout the house, holding a candlestick and with a gun under her arm. That night she passed through the cellar, and the light of the candle illuminated a straggler snail on the ceiling, with its trail of silver slime. A gunshot echoed. We all started in our beds, but immediately our heads sank back into the pillows, accustomed as we were to the house nun’s nighttime hunting. But with the snail destroyed and a piece of plaster knocked down by that unreasonable shot, Battista began shouting in her shrill voice, ‘Help! They’re all escaping! Help!’ The servants, half dressed, hurried to her aid, along with our father, armed with a saber, and the abbé without his wig, while the *cavalier avvocato*, before he could understand a thing and fearing trouble, fled into the fields and went to sleep in a hayloft.

In the light of the torches they all began to chase the snails through the cellar. No one really cared, but by now they were awake and, out of the usual egotism, didn’t want

to admit that they had been disturbed for nothing. They discovered the hole in the barrel and immediately knew it was us. Our father seized us in bed, with the coachman's whip. We ended up with purple stripes on our backs, our buttocks, and our legs, locked in the dirty storeroom that served as our prison.

They kept us there for three days, on bread, water, salad, pork rind, and cold minestrone (which, fortunately, we liked). Then the first meal with the family, as if nothing had happened, everything in order, that midday on June fifteenth – and what had our sister Battista, superintendent of the kitchen, prepared? Snail soup and snails for the main course. Cosimo wouldn't touch even a shell. 'Eat or we'll lock you in the storeroom again!' I gave in and began to swallow the mollusks. (It was a bit of cowardice on my part, and made my brother feel even more alone, so that in his leaving us there was also a protest against me, who had disappointed him; but I was only eight, and then what's the point of comparing my force of will, or rather, what I could have had as a child, with the superhuman obstinacy that marked the life of my brother?)

'And so?' our father said to Cosimo.

'No, and no!' said Cosimo, and pushed away the plate.

'Away from this table!'

But Cosimo had already turned his back on us and was leaving the room.

'Where are you going?'

Through the glass door we saw him in the hall, picking up his three-cornered hat and his small sword.

'I know!' He ran into the garden.

Shortly afterward, through the windows, we saw him climbing up the holm oak. He was dressed and coiffed with great propriety, as our father wanted him to come to the table, though he was only twelve: hair powdered and pony-tail tied with a ribbon, three-cornered hat, lace tie, green tailcoat, tight mauve trousers, sword, and long white leather gaiters that came to midthigh, the only concession to a way of dressing more suited to our country life. (I, being only eight, was exempted from the powder in my hair, except on gala occasions, and from the sword, which, however, I would have liked to carry.) So he climbed up into the gnarled tree, arms and legs moving through the branches with the assurance and speed gained from the long practice we'd done together.

I've already said that we spent hours and hours in the trees, and not for utilitarian reasons, like many boys, who climb up just to look for fruit or birds' nests, but for the pleasure of overcoming difficult protuberances and forks, and getting as high as possible, and finding beautiful places to stop and look at the world below, to make jokes and shout at those who passed under us. So I found it natural that Cosimo's first thought at that unjust anger against him was to climb the holm oak, a tree familiar to us, which, spreading its branches at the height of the dining-room windows, imposed his contemptuous and insulted behavior on the sight of the whole family.

*'Vorsicht! Vorsicht!'* Now he'll fall, poor thing!' exclaimed our mother anxiously, who would have happily seen us charging under cannon fire but meanwhile was in agony at every one of our games.

Cosimo climbed up to the fork of a large branch where he could sit comfortably, and there he sat, legs dangling, arms crossed, with his hands in his armpits, his head pulled down between his shoulders, the hat low on his forehead.

Our father leaned out the window. 'When you're tired of sitting there you'll change your mind!' he shouted.

'I'll never change my mind,' said my brother from the branch.

'I'll show you, as soon as you come down!'

'I'm never coming down again!' And he kept his word.

COSIMO was in the oak. The branches were waving, high bridges over the earth. A light wind was blowing; it was sunny. The sun shone among the leaves, and to see Cosimo we had to shield our eyes with our hands. Cosimo looked at the world from the tree: everything was different seen from up there, and that was already an entertainment. The avenue had a completely different prospect, as did the flower beds, the hydrangeas, the camellias, the small iron table where one could have coffee in the garden. Farther on, the foliage thinned out and the vegetable garden sloped down in small terraced fields supported by stone walls; the low hill was dark with olive groves, and behind, the built-up area of Ombrosa raised its roofs of faded brick and slate, and ships' flags peeked out from the port below. In the background the sea extended, high on the horizon, and a slow sailboat passed by.

Now the baron and the *generalessa*, after their coffee, came out into the garden. They looked at a rosebush, made a show of paying no attention to Cosimo. They gave each other their arm, but right away they separated, in order to discuss and



gesticulate. I went under the oak, as if playing on my own but in reality trying to get Cosimo's attention; he was still angry at me, though, and stayed up there looking into the distance. I stopped and crouched behind a bench so that I could continue to observe him without being seen.

My brother was like a sentinel. He looked at everything, and everything was as if nothing. A woman with a basket passed through the lemon groves. A mule driver went up the slope, holding on to the tail of the mule. They didn't see each other; the woman, at the sound of the iron-shod hooves, turned and leaned out toward the street, but wasn't in time. Then she began to sing, but the mule driver was already rounding the turn; he strained his ears, cracked the whip, and to the mule said, 'Aah!' And it all ended there. Cosimo saw this and that.

The Abbé Fauchelafleur came along the avenue with his open breviary. Cosimo grabbed something from the branch and dropped it on his head; I couldn't figure out what it was, maybe a little spider, or a splinter of bark; he missed. With his sword Cosimo began to poke around in a hole in the trunk. An angry wasp emerged; he chased it away, waving his hat, and followed its flight with his gaze as far as a pumpkin plant, where it alighted. Swift as always, the *cavalier avvocato* came out of the house, descended the garden steps, and vanished amid the rows of vines; to see where he was going, Cosimo climbed up another branch. There, amid the foliage, he heard a flutter, and a blackbird rose in flight. Cosimo was disappointed, because he had been up there all that time and hadn't noticed it. He sat staring into the sun to see if there were others. No, there were none.

The oak was near an elm; the two crowns almost touched. A branch of the elm passed about eighteen inches above a branch of the other tree; it was easy for my brother to take the step and thus get to the top of the elm, which we had never explored, because its boughs were high and couldn't be reached from the ground. Always looking for where a branch passed beside the branches of another tree, he crossed from the elm to a carob tree, and then to a mulberry. So I saw Cosimo advance from one branch to the next, walking suspended over the garden.

Several branches of the big mulberry extended to the boundary wall of our villa and hung over it, into the garden of the D'Ondarivas. Although we were neighbors, we knew nothing about the Marquises d'Ondariva and Nobles d'Ombrosa: since they had enjoyed for many generations certain feudal rights to which our father laid claim, a mutual resentment divided the two families, and a high wall, like the keep of a fortress, divided our villas – I don't know if our father or the marquis had had it built. One should add to that the jealousy with which the D'Ondarivas guarded their garden, which was populated, so it was said, by plant species never seen before. In fact, the father of the current marquis, a disciple of Linnaeus, had urged all the family's vast networks of relatives at the courts of France and England to have the most precious botanical rarities of the colonies sent to him, and for years ships had unloaded at Ombrosa sacks of seeds, bundles of cuttings, bushes in pots, and even whole trees, with enormous clumps of earth wrapped around the roots, until in that garden had grown – it was said – a mixture of forests of the Indies and the Americas, if not actually New Holland.

All we could see of it was the dark leaves of a tree newly imported from the American colonies peeking over the edge of the wall: a magnolia, whose black branches sprouted a fleshy white flower. From our mulberry Cosimo was on the top of the wall; he took a few steps, balancing, and then, holding on with his hands, dropped onto the other side, where the leaves and flowers of the magnolia were. From there he disappeared from my view; and what I will now recount, like many of the events in this story of his life, he reported to me later, or it was I who gleaned the stories from scattered testimonies and deductions.

Cosimo was in the magnolia. Although its branches were close together, this tree was easily accessible to a boy like my brother, expert in all species of trees; and the branches stood up to his weight, although they weren't very large and were of soft wood that the tips of Cosimo's shoes scraped, opening white wounds in the black bark; it wrapped the boy in a fresh scent of leaves as the wind stirred them, turning them to a green that was now opaque, now bright.

But it was the whole garden that gave off a perfume, and although it was so irregularly dense that Cosimo still couldn't see it all, he was exploring it with his sense of smell, and he tried to distinguish its various scents, which had been known to him ever since, carried by the wind, they reached our garden and seemed to us one with the secret of that villa. Then he looked at the foliage and saw new leaves, some as big and shiny as if a film of water were running over them, some tiny and composite, and trunks that were all smooth or all scaly.

There was a great silence. Only a flight of tiny warblers rose above him, crying. And he heard a faint voice singing: 'Oh là là là! The *ba-lan-çoire* ...' Cosimo looked down. Hanging from a branch of a big tree nearby was a swing, with a girl of about ten sitting on it.

She was a fair-haired girl, with her hair arranged in a tall style that was a little odd for a child, and a blue dress that was also too adult; the skirt, lifted by the swing, was dripping with lace. The girl was gazing with eyes half closed and nose in the air, as if she were used to playing the lady, and she was taking bites of an apple, bending her head each time toward the hand that had at the same time to hold the apple and hold on to the rope of the swing, and every time the swing was at the lowest point of its arc she gave herself a push, hitting the ground with the tips of her shoes, and from her lips blew out the bits of chewed apple skin, and sang, 'Oh là là là! The *ba-lan-çoire* ...' like a girl who now no longer cares about the swing, or about the song, or (but maybe a little more) about the apple, and already has other thoughts in her head.

From the top of the magnolia, Cosimo dropped to the lowest branches, and now he was standing with his feet planted each in one fork and his elbows resting on a branch in front of him as if it were a windowsill. The flights of the swing carried the girl right under his nose.

She wasn't paying attention and didn't notice him. Suddenly she saw him there, standing in the tree, in three-cornered hat and gaiters. 'Oh!' she said.

The apple fell out of her hand and rolled to the foot of the magnolia. Cosimo unsheathed his sword, lowered himself

down from the bottom branch, touched the apple with the tip of the sword, pierced it, and offered it to the girl, who in the meantime had swung to and fro and was back again. 'Take it – it's not dirty, just a little bruised on one side.'

The fair-haired girl had already regretted her display of amazement at the unknown boy who had appeared in the magnolia and had recovered her haughty, nose-in-the-air expression. 'Are you a thief?' she said.

'A thief?' said Cosimo, offended; then he thought about it. On the spot he liked the idea. 'Yes,' he said, lowering the hat over his forehead. 'Do you have something against it?'

'What have you come to steal?'

Cosimo looked at the apple he had skewered on the tip of the sword, and it occurred to him that he was hungry, that he had touched scarcely any food at the table. 'This apple,' he said, and began to peel it with the blade of the sword, which, in spite of family prohibitions, he kept very sharp.

'Then you're a fruit thief,' said the girl.

My brother thought of the gangs of poor boys from Ombrosa who climbed over walls and hedges and ransacked the orchards, a kind of boy he had been taught to despise and to flee, and for the first time he thought of how free and enviable that life must be. There: maybe he could become like them, and from now on live like that. 'Yes,' he said. He had cut the apple in slices and began to eat it.

The fair-haired girl burst into a laugh that lasted the whole back-and-forth of the swing, up and down. 'Come on! I know the boys who steal fruit! They're all my friends! And they go barefoot, in shirtsleeves, uncombed, not in gaiters and a wig!'

My brother turned as red as the skin of the apple. Being made fun of not only for the powder, which he didn't like in the least, but also for the gaiters, which he liked enormously, and being judged of an aspect inferior to that of a fruit thief, that type he had until a moment before despised, and above all to discover that that damsel who was acting like the mistress of the garden of the D'Ondarivas was a friend of the fruit thieves but not his friend – all these things together filled him with contempt, shame, and jealousy.

'Oh là là là ... In gaiters and wig!' sang the girl on the swing.

A vengeful pride possessed him. 'I'm not one of those thieves you know!' he cried. 'I'm not a thief at all! I just said that so as not to scare you, because if you knew who I really am, you'd die of fear. I'm a bandit! A ferocious bandit!'

The girl continued to fly up under his nose; one would have said she wanted to touch him with the tips of her shoes. 'Come on! Where's your gun? Bandits all have a gun! Or a harquebus. I've seen them! They've stopped our carriage five times on our trips from the castle to here!'

'But not the chief! I'm the chief! The chief of the bandits doesn't have a gun! He has only a sword!' And he held out his sword.

The girl shrugged her shoulders. 'The chief of the bandits,' she explained, 'is called Gian dei Brughi and he always comes and brings us presents at Christmas and Easter.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Cosimo di Rondò, hit by a wave of family partisanship. 'Then my father is right when he says that the Marquis d'Ondariva is the protector of all the lawlessness and smuggling around here!'

The girl passed close to the ground, but instead of pushing off she braked with a rapid kick and jumped down. The empty swing flew into the air on its ropes. 'Get down from there immediately! How dare you enter our property!' she said, pointing a finger at the boy.

'I haven't entered and I won't come down,' said Cosimo, equally heated. 'I've never set foot on your property and I wouldn't for all the gold in the world.'

Then the girl very calmly picked up a fan that was lying on a wicker chair and, although it wasn't very hot, fanned herself as she walked back and forth. 'Now,' she said tranquilly, 'I'll call the servants and have you captured and beaten. That'll teach you to sneak onto our land!' She kept changing her tone, this girl, and each time my brother was thrown off.

'Where I am isn't land and isn't yours!' proclaimed Cosimo, and already he was tempted to add, 'And after all, I am the Duke of Ombrosa and the lord of all the land!' But he restrained himself, because he didn't like repeating the things that his father always said, now that he had run away from the table in an argument with him. He didn't like it and it didn't seem right to him, also because those claims about the dukedom had always seemed like obsessions to him; what did it have to do with the matter that he, too, Cosimo, should begin to boast that he was the duke? But he didn't want to contradict himself and continued the conversation as it occurred to him. 'Here it's not yours,' he repeated, 'because yours is the ground and if I put a foot there then I would be sneaking in. But not up here, no, and I go anywhere I like.'

'Yes, then it's yours, up there ...'

'Of course! My personal territory, everything up here,' and he made a vague gesture toward the branches, the leaves against the sun, the sky. 'All the branches of the trees are my territory. Tell them to come and get me, if they can!'

Now, after all that bluster, he expected that she would somehow or other make fun of him. Instead she appeared unexpectedly interested. 'Ah yes? And how far does that territory of yours reach?'

'As far as you can go if you move through the trees – this way, that way, beyond the wall, into the olive grove, up the hill, to the other side of the hill, into the woods, into the bishop's lands ...'

'Even as far as France?'

'As far as Poland and Saxony,' said Cosimo, whose knowledge of geography was limited to the names mentioned by our mother when she talked about the Wars of Succession. 'But I'm not an egotist like you. I invite you into my territory.' Now they had begun to use the familiar *tu*, but it was she who had started it.

'And who does the swing belong to?' she said, and sat down in it, with the open fan in her hand.

'The swing is yours,' Cosimo confirmed, 'but since it's tied to this branch it's my dependent. So if you sit there touching the ground with your feet, you're in yours, but if you rise into the air you're in mine.'

She gave herself a push and flew up, her hands clutching the ropes. From the magnolia Cosimo jumped onto the big branch that held the swing, grabbed hold of the ropes, and began making it swing himself. The swing went higher and higher.