

1

There was nothing much to notice about the field, a hundred-metre square of dry grass below a small village in the foothills of the Dolomites. It lay at the bottom of a slope covered with hardwood trees which could easily be culled for firewood, and that was used as an argument to increase the price when the land and the two-hundred-year-old house upon it came to be sold. Off to the north a slant-faced mountain loomed over the small town of Ponte nelle Alpi; a hundred kilometres to the south lay Venice, too far away to influence the politics or customs of the area. People in the villages spoke Italian with some reluctance, felt more at home in Bellunese dialect.

The field had lain untilled for almost half a century, and the stone house had sat empty. The immense slates that made up the roof had shifted

with age and sudden changes in temperature, perhaps even with the occasional earthquake that had struck the area during the centuries the roof had protected the house from rain and snow, and so it no longer did that, for many of the slates had crashed to earth, leaving the upper rooms exposed to the elements. Because the house and property lay at the heart of a contested will, none of the eight heirs had bothered to repair the leaks, fearful that they would never get back the few hundred thousand lire the repairs would cost. So the rain and snow dripped, then flowed, in, nibbling away at plaster and floorboards, and each year the roof tilted more drunkenly towards the earth.

The field, too, had been abandoned for the same reasons. None of the presumptive heirs wanted to expend either time or money working the land, nor did they want to weaken their legal position by being seen to make unpaid use of the property. Weeds flourished, made all the more vital by the fact that the last people to cultivate the land had for decades manured it with the droppings of their rabbits.

It was the scent of foreign money that settled the dispute about the will: two days after a retired German doctor made an offer for the house and land, the eight heirs met at the home of the eldest. Before the end of the evening, they had arrived at a unanimous decision to sell the house and land; their subsequent decision was not to sell until the foreigner had doubled his offer, which would bring the selling price to four times what any local resident would – or could – pay.

Three weeks after the deal was completed, scaf-

folding went up, and the centuries-old, hand-cut slates were hurled down to shatter in the courtyard below. The art of laying the slates had died with the artisans who knew how to cut them, and so they were replaced with moulded rectangles of prefabricated cement that had a vague resemblance to terra cotta tiles. Because the doctor had hired the oldest of the heirs to serve as his foreman, work progressed quickly; because this was the Province of Belluno, it was done honestly and well. By the middle of the spring, the restoration of the house was almost complete, and with the approach of the first warm days, the new owner, who had spent his professional life enclosed in brightly lit operating rooms and who was conducting the restorations by phone and fax from Munich, turned his thoughts to the creation of the garden he had dreamed about for years.

Village memory is long, and it recalled that the old garden had run alongside the row of walnut trees out behind the house, so it was there that Egidio Buschetti, the foreman, decided to plough. The land hadn't been worked for most of his own lifetime, so Buschetti estimated that his tractor would have to pass over the land twice, once to cut through the metre-high weeds, and then once again to disc up the rich soil lying underneath.

At first Buschetti thought it was a horse – he remembered that the old owners had kept two – and so he continued with his tractor all the way to what he had established as the end of the field. Pulling at the broad wheel, he swung the tractor around and headed back, proud of the razor-straightness of the furrows, glad to be out in the

sun again, happy at the sound and the feel of the work, sure now that spring had come. He saw the bone sticking up crookedly from the furrow he had just ploughed, the white length of it sharply visible against the nearly black earth. No, not long enough to be a horse, but he didn't remember that anyone had ever kept sheep here. Curious, he slowed the tractor, somehow reluctant to ride over the bone and shatter it.

He shifted into neutral and drew to a stop. Pulling on the hand brake, he climbed down from his high metal seat and walked over towards the cantilevered bone that jutted up towards the sky. He bent and reached out to shove it away from the path of the tractor, but a sudden reluctance pulled him upright again, and he prodded at it with the toe of his heavy boot, hoping thus to dislodge it. It refused to move, so Buschetti turned towards the tractor, where he kept a shovel clamped in back of his seat. As he turned, his eyes fell upon a gleaming white oval a bit farther along the bottom of the furrow. No horse, no sheep had ever gazed out from so round a skull, nor would they leer up at him through the sharpened carnivore teeth so frighteningly like his own.

2

The intuition of the news in just a country town never spreads faster than when it deals with death or disaster, so the news that human bones had been discovered in the garden of the old Orsez house was common knowledge throughout the village of Col di Cugnan before dinnertime. It was not since the death of the mayor's son in that automobile accident down by the cement factory seven years ago that news had spread so quickly; even the story about Graziella Rovere and the electrician had taken two days to become common knowledge. But that night the villagers, all seventy-four of them, switched off their televisions, or talked above them, during dinner, trying to think of how it could be and, more interestingly, who it could be.

The mink-sweatered news reader on RAI 3, the blonde who wore a different pair of glasses each

night, went ignored as she reported the latest horrors in the ex-Yugoslavia, and no one paid the slightest heed to the arrest of the former Minister of the Interior on charges of corruption. Both were by now normal, but a skull in a ditch behind the home of the foreigner, that was news. By bedtime, the skull had been variously reported to have been shattered by a blow from an axe, or a bullet, and to display signs that an attempt had been made to dissolve it with acid. The police had determined, people were certain, that they were the bones of a pregnant woman, a young male, and the husband of Luigina Menegaz, gone off to Rome twelve years ago and never heard from since. That night people in Col di Cugnan locked their doors, and those who had lost the keys years ago and never bothered about them slept less easily than did the others.

At eight the next morning, two *Carabinieri*-driven all-terrain vehicles arrived at the home of Doctor Litfin and drove across the newly planted grass to park on either side of the two long rows ploughed the day before. It was not until an hour later that a car arrived from the provincial centre of Belluno, carrying the *medico legale* of that city. He had heard none of the rumours about the identity or cause of death of the person whose bones lay in the field, and so he did what seemed most necessary: he set his two assistants to sifting through the earth to find the rest of the remains.

As this slow process advanced, both of the *Carabinieri* vehicles took turns driving across the soon-destroyed lawn and up to the village, where the six officers had coffees in the small bar, then began to ask the residents of the village if anyone

was missing. The fact that the bones seemed to have been in the earth for years did not affect their decision to ask about recent events, and so their researches proved ineffective.

In the field below the village, the two assistants of Doctor Bortot had set up a fine mesh screen at a sharp angle. Slowly, they poured buckets of earth through it, bending down occasionally to pick out a small bone or anything that looked like it might be one. As they pulled them out, they displayed them to their superior, who stood at the edge of the furrow, hands clasped behind his back. A long sheet of black plastic lay spread at his feet, and as he was shown the bones, he instructed his assistants where to place them, and together they slowly began to assemble their macabre jigsaw puzzle.

Occasionally he asked one of the men to hand him a bone, and he studied it for a moment before bending to place it somewhere on the plastic sheet. Twice he corrected himself, once bending to move a small bone from the right side to the left, and another time, with a muttered exclamation, moving another from below the metatarsal to the end of what had once been a wrist.

At ten, Doctor Litfin arrived, having been alerted the previous evening to the discovery in his garden and having driven through the night from Munich. He parked in front of his house and pulled himself stiffly from the driver's seat. Beyond the house, he saw the countless deep tracks cut into the new grass he had planted with such simple joy three weeks before. But then he saw the three men standing in the field off in the distance, almost as far away as the patch of young raspberry plants he had

brought down from Germany and planted at the same time. He started across the destroyed lawn but stopped in his tracks at a shouted command that came from somewhere off to his right. He looked around but saw nothing except the three ancient apple trees that had grown up around the ruined well. Seeing no one, he started again towards the three men in the field. He had taken only a few steps before two men dressed in the ominous black uniforms of the *Carabinieri* burst out from under the nearest of the apple trees, machine guns aimed at him.

Doctor Litfin had survived the Russian occupation of Berlin, and though that had happened fifty years before, his body remembered the sight of armed men in uniform. He put both of his hands above his head and stood rock-still.

They came out fully from the shadows then, and the doctor had a hallucinogenic moment of seeing the contrast of their death-black uniforms against the innocent backdrop of pink apple blossom. Their glossy boots trampled across a carpet of fresh-fallen petals as they approached him.

'What are you doing here?' the first one demanded.

'Who are you?' the other asked in the same angry tone.

In Italian made clumsy by fear, he began, 'I'm Doctor Litfin. I'm the . . .' he said but stopped to search for the appropriate term. 'I'm the *padrone* here.'

The *Carabinieri* had been told that the new owner was a German, and the accent sounded real enough, so they lowered their guns, though they

kept their fingers near the triggers. Litfin took this as permission to lower his hands, though he did that very slowly. Because he was German, he knew that guns were always superior to any claim to legal rights, and so he waited for them to approach him, but this did not prevent him from turning his attention momentarily back to the three men who stood in the newly ploughed earth, they now as motionless as he, their attention on him and the approaching *Carabinieri*.

The two officers, suddenly diffident in the face of the person who could afford the restorations to house and land evident all around them, approached Doctor Litfin, and as they drew nearer, the balance of power changed. Litfin perceived this, and seized the moment.

‘What is all of this?’ he asked, pointing across the field and leaving it to the policemen to infer whether he meant his ruined lawn or the three men who stood at the other side of it.

‘There’s a body in your field,’ the first officer answered.

‘I know that, but what’s all this . . .?’ he sought the proper word and came up only with ‘*distruzione*’.

The marks of the tyre treads seemed actually to grow deeper as the three men studied them, until finally one of the policemen said, ‘We had to drive down into the field.’

Though this was an obvious lie, Litfin ignored it. He turned away from the two officers and started to walk towards the other three men so quickly that neither of the officers tried to stop him. When he got to the end of the first deep trench, he called across to the man who was obviously in charge,

'What is it?'

'Are you Doctor Litfin?' asked the other doctor, who had already been told about the German, what he had paid for the house, and how much he had spent so far on restorations.

Litfin nodded and when the other man was slow to answer, asked again, 'What is it?'

'I'd say it was a man in his twenties,' Doctor Bortot answered and then, turning back to his assistants, motioned them to continue with their work.

It took Litfin a moment to recover from the brusqueness of the reply, but when he did, he stepped on to the ploughed earth and went to stand beside the other doctor. Neither man said anything for a long time as they stood side by side and watched the two men in the trench scrape away slowly at the dirt.

After a few minutes, one of the men handed Doctor Bortot another bone, which, with a quick glance, he bent and placed at the end of the other wrist. Two more bones; two more quick placements.

'There, on your left, Pizzetti,' Bortot said, pointing to a tiny white knob that lay exposed on the far side of the trench. The man he spoke to glanced at it, bent and picked it from the earth, and handed it up to the doctor. Bortot studied it for a moment, holding it delicately between his first two fingers, then turned to the German. 'Lateral cuneiform?' he asked.

Litfin pursed his lips as he looked at the bone. Even before the German could speak, Bortot handed it to him. Litfin turned it in his hands for a moment, then glanced down at the pieces of bone

laid out on the plastic at their feet. 'That, or it might be the intermediate,' he answered, more comfortable with the Latin than the Italian.

'Yes, yes, it could be,' Bortot replied. He waved his hand down towards the plastic sheet, and Litfin stooped to place it at the end of the long bone leading to the foot. He stood up and both men looked at it. 'Ja, ja,' Litfin muttered; Bortot nodded.

And so for the next hour the two men stood together beside the trench left by the tractor, first one and then the other taking a bone from the two men who continued to sift the rich earth through the tilted screen. Occasionally they conferred about a fragment or sliver, but generally they agreed about the identity of what was passed up to them by the two diggers.

The spring sun poured down on them; off in the distance, a cuckoo began his mating call, repeating it until the four men were no longer aware of it. As it grew hotter, they began to peel off their coats and then their jackets, all of which ended up hung on the lower branches of the trees running along the side of the field to mark the end of the property.

To pass the time, Bortot asked a few questions about the house, and Litfin explained that the exterior restorations were finished; there remained the interior work, which he estimated would take much of the summer. When Bortot asked the other doctor why he spoke Italian so well, Litfin explained that he had been coming to Italy on vacation for twenty years and, during the last, to prepare himself for the move, had been taking classes three times a week. The bells from the village above them rang out twelve times.

'I think that might be all, Dottore,' one of the men in the trench said and, to emphasize it, struck his shovel deep into the ground and rested his elbow on it. He took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. The other man stopped as well, took out a handkerchief and wiped his face.

Bortot looked down at the patch of excavated earth, now about three metres square, then down at the bones and shrivelled organs spread out on the plastic sheeting.

Litfin suddenly asked, 'Why did you think it's a young man?'

Before answering, Bortot bent down and picked up the skull. 'The teeth,' he said, handing it to the other man.

But instead of looking at the teeth, which were in good condition and with no sign of the wearing-away of age, Litfin, with a small grunt of surprise, turned the skull to expose the back. In the centre, just above the indentation that would fit around the still-missing final vertebra, there was a small round hole. He had seen enough of skulls and of violent death that he was neither shocked nor disturbed.

'But why male?' he asked, handing the skull back to Bortot.

Before he answered, Bortot knelt and placed the skull back in its place at the top of the other bones. 'This: it was near the skull,' he said as he stood, taking something from his jacket pocket and handing it to Litfin. 'I don't think a woman would wear that.'

The ring he handed Litfin was a thick gold band that flared out into a round, flat surface. Litfin put the ring on to the palm of his left hand and turned

it over with the index finger of his right. The design was so worn away that at first he could distinguish nothing, but then it slowly came into focus: carved in low relief was an intricate design of an eagle rampant holding a flag in its left claw, a sword in its right. 'I forget the Italian word,' Litfin said as he looked at the ring. 'A family crest?'

'*Stemma*,' Bortot supplied.

'*Sì, stemma*,' Litfin repeated and then asked, 'Do you recognize it?'

Bortot nodded.

'What is it?'

'It's the crest of the Lorenzoni family.'

Litfin shook his head. He'd never heard of them.

'Are they from around here?'

This time Bortot shook his head.

As he handed back the ring, Litfin asked, 'Where are they from?'

'Venice.'

3

Not only Doctor Bortot, but just about anyone in the Veneto region, would recognize the name Lorenzoni. Students of history would recall the Count of that name who accompanied the blind Doge Dandolo at the sack of Constantinople in 1204; legend has it that it was Lorenzoni who handed the old man his sword as they scrambled over the wall of the city. Musicians would recall that the principal contributor to the building of the first opera theatre in Venice bore the name of Lorenzoni. Bibliophiles recognized the name as that of the man who had lent Aldus Manutius the money to set up his first printing press in the city in 1495. But these are the memories of specialists and historians, people who have reason to recall the glories of the city and of the family. Ordinary Venetians recall it as the name of the man who, in

1944, provided the SS with the chance to discover the names and addresses of the Jews living in the city.

Of the 256 Venetian Jews who had been living in the city, eight survived the war. But that is only one way of looking at the fact and at the numbers. More crudely put, it means that 248 people, citizens of Italy and residents of what had once been the Most Serene Republic of Venice, were taken forcibly from their homes and eventually murdered.

Italians are nothing if not pragmatic, so many people believed that, if it had not been Pietro Lorenzoni, the father of the present count, it would have been someone else who revealed the hiding place of the head of the Jewish community to the SS. Others suggested that he must have been threatened into doing it: after all, since the end of the war the members of the various branches of the family had certainly devoted themselves to the good of the city, not only by their many acts of charity and generosity to public and private institutions, but by their having filled various civic posts – once even that of mayor, though for only six months – and having served with distinction, as the phrase has it, in many public capacities. One Lorenzoni had been the Rector of the University; another organized the Biennale for a period of time in the Sixties; and yet another had, upon his death, left his collection of Islamic miniatures to the Correr Museum.

Even if they didn't remember any of these things, much of the population of the city recalled the name as that of the young man who had been kidnapped two years ago, taken by two masked men

from beside his girlfriend while they were parked in front of the gates of the family villa outside Treviso. The girl had first called the police, not the family, and so the Lorenzonis' assets had been frozen immediately, even before the family learned of the crime. The first ransom note, when it came, demanded seven billion lire, and at the time there was much speculation about whether the Lorenzonis could find that much money. The next note, which came three days after the first, lowered the sum to five billion.

But by then the forces of order, though making no evident signs of progress in finding the men responsible, had responded as was standard in cases of kidnapping and had effectively blocked all attempts on the part of the family to borrow money or bring it in from foreign sources, and so the second demand also went unmet. Count Ludovico, the father of the kidnapped boy, went on national television and begged those responsible to free his son. He said he was willing to give himself up to them in his son's place, though he was too upset to explain how this could be done.

There was no response to his appeal; there was no third ransom demand.

That was two years ago, and since then there had been no sign of the boy, Roberto, and no further progress, at least not public progress, on the case. Though the family's assets had been unblocked after a period of six months, they remained for another year under the control of a government administrator, who had to consent to the withdrawal or liquidation of any sum in excess of a hundred million lire. Many such sums passed out

of the Lorenzoni family businesses during that period, but all of them were legitimate, and so permission was given for them to be paid out. After the administrator's powers lapsed, a gentle governmental eye, as discreet as it was invisible, continued to observe the Lorenzoni business and spending, but no outlay was indicated beyond the normal course of business expenditure.

The boy, though another three years would have to pass before he could be declared legally dead, was believed by his family to be so in the real sense. His parents mourned in their fashion: Count Ludovico redoubled the energy he devoted to his business concerns, while the Contessa withdrew into private devotion and acts of piety and charity. Roberto was an only child, so the family was now perceived as having no heir, and thus a nephew, the son of Ludovico's younger brother, was brought into the business and groomed to take over the direction of the Lorenzoni affairs, which included vast and diverse holdings in Italy and abroad.

The news that the skeleton of a young man wearing a ring with the Lorenzoni family crest had been found was telephoned to the Venice police from the phone in one of the *Carabinieri* vehicles and received by Sergeant Lorenzo Vianello, who took careful notes of the location, the name of the owner of the property, and of the man who had discovered the body.

After replacing the phone, Vianello went upstairs and knocked on the door of his immediate superior, Commissario Guido Brunetti. When he heard the shouted '*Avanti*', Vianello pushed open the door and went into Brunetti's office.

'*Buon dì, Commissario,*' he said and, not having to be invited, took his usual place in the chair opposite Brunetti, who sat behind his desk, a thick folder opened in front of him. Vianello noticed that his superior was wearing glasses; he didn't remember ever seeing them before.

'Since when do you wear glasses, sir?' he asked.

Brunetti looked up then, his eyes strangely magnified by the lenses. 'Just for reading,' he said, taking them off and tossing them down on to the papers in front of him. 'I don't really need them. It's just that it makes the fine print on these papers from Brussels easier to read.' With thumb and forefinger, he grabbed at the bridge of his nose and rubbed it, as if to remove the impression of the glasses as well as that left by what he had been reading.

He looked up at the sergeant. 'What is it?'

'We've had a call from the *Carabinieri* in a place called . . .' he began, then looked down at the piece of paper in his hand. 'Col di Cugnan.' Vianello paused but Brunetti said nothing. 'It's in the province of Belluno,' as if giving Brunetti a clear idea of the geography would be helpful. When Brunetti still said nothing, Vianello continued. 'A farmer up there has dug up a body in a field. It appears to be a young man in his early twenties.'

'According to whom?' Brunetti interrupted.

'I think it was the *medico legale*, sir.'

'When did this happen?' Brunetti asked.

'Yesterday.'

'Why did they call us?'

'A ring with the Lorenzoni crest was found with the body.'