

Chapter One Before The Great War

This is the grand life of yours truly Vincenzo Rabito, born in Chiaramonte Gulfi, then in the province of Siracusa, on 31 March 1899.

My father Salvatore Rabito died of pneumonia at the age of 40, when I was only ten, leaving my mother a widow with seven children to bring up.

I was the second of this large family and I knew what was needed to get by. My older brother Giovanni thought only about his belly and even when he did earn something he never brought the money home. I was the one who couldn't bear to hear my mother worrying. When my pockets were empty I went around angry and swearing, but whenever I had money I would dance all the way home.

My mother always used to say to the neighbours,

“If it wasn't for my son Vincenzo, we could all starve to death in this family !”

Once, in September, which was grape-harvest time and they were looking for grape-pickers at Vittoria, I remember I set out with four friends from Chiaramonte, on foot, at four in the morning. We got there at eight, but the others, before going to look for work, decided to stop off at the brothel. The price of a whore was, at that time, five *soldi* and I didn't have so much as a *lira*, all I had with me was something to eat, four loaves of bread. I waited outside and when my mates had finished and done they asked me,

“What, Vincenzo – nothing for you ?!”

I was the youngest of the group, only twelve or thirteen years old and by law they shouldn't even have let me into the brothel. But my mates made a collection for me and that was the first time I got to know about having a good time with women.

Satisfied with this first 'job' done, we ate the bread with grapes we had picked all along the way, then we went into the square to talk to the agents. I was lucky right away and found a friend of my father's who asked me,

“Vincenzo, do you want to come and carry grapes on horseback, the pay's seventy *centesimi* a day ?”

“That's not much !” I said.

He told me I was too young to earn like an adult and in the end I had to take it.

“Even if I spend four *soldi* a day on bread,” I thought, “I'll still have ten *soldi* and so I'm all right !”

He took me to Santa Teresa near the village of Acate, which then was called Biscari. He gave me a horse and I had to take grapes from the vineyard to the winepress. I had to take two large baskets of a hundred kilos each on every trip, but the bigger lads did the loading and unloading. My job was easy, I just had to ride the horse all day long – the only thing was, the others got at least three times as much as I did.

“Wouldn't it be good,” I started to think, “If even I could get a job earning two *lire* a day !”

I thought about it so much that in the end the Almighty heard me. One of the six pickers fell ill and the master called me to take his place.

“If you can do his job,” he told me, “I’ll pay you two *lire* a day just like the others.”

I felt as if I’d won the lottery and straightaway I started cutting grapes frantically with my special knife. The other five men were only too pleased if I earned the same as them – they had all known my father and they knew how my family was in need. Lots of times they threw the grapes into my baskets themselves when they saw they were too high for me to reach.

I worked for fifteen days at Santa Teresa with only one shirt and one pair of trousers. I hadn’t got any change of clothes with me and I ended up tattered and mucky as an urchin.

When the work was done the master gave me thirty *lire*, all in small change, which I had to tie up in a sock. Then, as the old tradition was, he gave me ten kilos of green grapes, four litres of wine and fifty chunks of sardine. I got hold of a wicker basket and I put the money on the bottom and the food on top. I felt rich as a lord ! The other workers wanted to take me to Vittoria to look for more work, but I was too excited and just wanted to go home.

I took the road from Biscari to Chiaramonte and started walking frantically. I didn’t want to get lifts from carts because I was scared they would pinch my money off me. So I got to Quaglio and my uncle, amazed when he saw me, said,

“Where have you sprung from, looking such a mess ?”

He asked me if I was hungry but I didn’t even stop to answer him, I just kept going. I got home in a great sweat and my mother started crying right away – I really did look like a Saint Lazarus.

“Don’t worry, I’m all right !” I said to her.

I put the basket on the table and the little ones attacked the grapes right away. Then I took the sock and emptied all those coins into a dish.

“Now count them,” I told the kids, “and put them in heaps of one *lira* !”

Paolo and Turidda set to, counting all those little coins of one and two *soldi* – which meant five and ten *centesimi* in King Vittorio Emanuele’s money – and then, helped by my mother, they made thirty-five piles of a *lira* each. The delight in that poor house of ours that day was unforgettable and my mother forgot all her worries.

“My lad,” she said, “God’ll reward you and send you lots of luck in your life !”

That might have been in the year 1912 because I remember there was the war in Tripoli and you can’t imagine now the poverty there was in Sicily at that time.

One day, a friend of my father’s came to the house and put a proposition to my mother :

“*Signora*, seeing as you’re in bad straits, why don’t you send Vincenzo to be a farm hand ? I know someone who’ll take him to help in the fields – he’s a well-off *Massaro* of Grammichele, he pays well and what’s more, he’s got no children. He might even take to Vincenzo like a son !”

Just at that time there was no work in sight for me and I asked right away,

“.... Raffaele, how much will the master give me a month ?”

“Two *tumina* of corn and five *lire* in cash !” he replied.

My mother didn’t want me to go because the village of Grammichele was too far away, but thinking that I would be fed for sure I said right off,

“If I get two *tumina* in advance, I’ll come !”

I knew that we had no flour left in the house and that the corn would be a boon for us.

Massaro Raffaele, known as *Il Picciridditto*, agreed and left for Grammichele. A week later he came back with two donkeys and the corn.

“Ready then, Vincenzo,” he said, “now look, I’ve spoken of you as an honest, hard-working, polite young lad. Don’t make a fool of me !”

At two-o-clock in the night we left, and my mother couldn’t stop crying. The agreement was that they would have to bring me back after a month for one week’s break – as if I wouldn’t have been able to find the way back by myself !

It was early March and icy cold, but riding the donkey I was happy enough and didn’t feel the cold. I was thinking that I was going to see somewhere new and that those two *tumina* of corn had solved a lot of problems for my family. We took six hours to cover thirty kilometres and we got to Grammichele at eight in the morning. The master was a great lout called Michele Aledda. He was waiting at the door and asked me straight off in a big, loud voice,

“What’s your name ?”

“Vincenzo,” I said.

“Bravo, Vincenzo,” he said, “you’re late on your first day – already wasted half a day’s work !”

Massaro Il Picciridditto explained that it had been raining along the way, while *Signora* Carmela, Aledda’s wife, laid the table immediately and made me two fried eggs with a piece of cheese and a freshly baked loaf. I was for finishing off the whole of that homemade bread, about two kilos at least it weighed, and the master and mistress were staring at me open-mouthed, crossing themselves. In the meantime the mules were got ready and *Massaro* Michele started clattering about.

“Come on, Vincenzo,” he told me, “now you’ve eaten, let’s get to work !”

But *Signora* Carmela said, “Michele, you shouldn’t go this morning, there’s going to be a storm – before you even get into the countryside you’ll be wet and find yourselves in trouble, the mules as well. Anyway, let the lad rest today, he’s come from Chiaramonte and he’s tired !”

The great oaf turned on her just like a dog and said,

“Look here, the lad hasn’t walked here, he’s been riding the donkey ! Before it gets to midday you’ll see, the sun’ll come out ! Right, Vincenzo ?” he asked me then.

I had to nod, because you can’t ever say no to the master, but really I thought *Signora* Carmela was right. The weather was really turning nasty.

“Go on then and get yourself soaking wet like a blockhead !” his wife ended up saying. “I’m just sorry for Vincenzo and the mules !”

I wasn’t afraid of the storm, only my bottom was hurting with riding all the time. Anyway, we put on two heavy field coats and set out. After a couple of hours

there was a sudden downpour that seemed like the end of the world. There was no way of sheltering and under the rain I was thinking,

“*Signora Carmela* was right to call him a blockhead – if he carries on like this I won’t see out the month with this lout !”

At Mazzarrone, which at that time wasn’t even a village and there were just two or three houses, we got inside a barn. Soaked like we were, we waited for the storm to die down. After a bit the master said,

“We’ll go home now, Vincenzo – it means today we haven’t even earned the bread we’ve eaten !”

Still under the rain we went back to Grammichele, while I was thinking,

“This *Massaro Aledda* is a real bastard!”

“I told you it was going to rain !” was the first thing his wife said when we arrived and he, really furious, told her,

“Shut up, Carmela, or else you’ll get a taste of the mule’s whip !”

“Show the lad from Chiaramonte how clever you are !” she answered back, “you’re nothing but an animal !”

Then she went to light the fire and said to me, like a proper mother,

“Dry yourself properly, Vincenzo, otherwise you’ll get ill.”

That brute Aledda hadn’t dreamt even once of giving me a good word, only told me,

“You haven’t even earned the bread you ate !”

And to think that I had been on the move since two in the morning for him!

As soon as he’d finished eating, some time around seven in the evening, the master said to me,

“Vincenzo, off to sleep right away, we have to be up at one !”

“But *Massaro Michele*,” I blurted out, “I’m worn out and you want me to get up at one ?”

“Look son,” he said, “I’ll excuse you because you’re a young’un, but don’t you know that when someone pays you, you have to work for him.”

Signora Carmela was making signs at me to keep quiet so I knew that if I answered back again I would get a clout. I said,

“Yessir,” and went to bed.

“Good job I got them to give me the two *tumina* of corn in advance,” I thought, “but I’m not going to finish the month with this lout !”

I slept in the stable with the mules and after a bit *Signora Carmela* came with another blanket. Just when I was sleeping most soundly, the master woke me up so abruptly I thought there was an earthquake.

“Get up, Vincenzo, it’s one o’clock !” he said, pulling the covers off me and making a row. Then he filled the saddle-bags with food and loaded the mules with the plough and lots of seed. Being so tired the night before, I had gone to bed in my clothes, so I only had to put my shoes on and without so much as washing my face I went out with him. The sky was nice and clear and on the mules we headed for a district called “Giurfo”, where the master had a small piece of land. We got there at five in the morning, while it was still dark and of course, at that hour, what on earth

could we do ? We waited for the sun to come up, doing nothing, and I was thinking to myself,

“What a bastard this Aledda is !”

In the meantime, from where we were I was beginning to make out the village of Chiaramonte, because “Giurfo” was about five kilometres from “Dicchiara” just beyond the river Dirillo. Right away I thought that if I got it into my head to run away, that was just the right spot.

At six, we got down to work, the master up ahead with the plough and me behind sowing chick-peas. For five days running we went to “Giurfo”, always getting up at two in the morning. I kept on saying “Yessir” to the master and even paying him compliments, telling him how expert and clever he was, and all the time I was planning my escape.

The first Sunday arrived at last and even then I had to get up early. The master took me to hear early Mass, while his wife went to the eight-o-clock one. God-fearing hours were unknown to that swine !

Anyway, I slowly earned his complete trust in me, so much so that once he said to me,

“Vincenzo, today you’ll go to Mass with Signora Carmela and afterwards I want you to tell me who she stops to speak to.”

That was how I found out that the fiend was being made a fool of too, and instead of spying for him I got in cahoots with the mistress, who really treated me well and respected me like a son. I spent nearly all of Holy Week going with *Signora Carmela* to Mass and only told her husband what it was possible to tell him – so we all ended up in peace and harmony in that house ! But I was afraid that if one day the truth came out, that swine of Aledda might break my head open.

“Women are all the same,” I thought, “You never know, one day quarrelling with her husband she might say – Michele, you’re so stupid you even let a boy make a fool of you !”

I could easily end up with the worst of it, because as we all know, if you get involved in dirty dealings you can end up with the worst of it !

So I made up my mind it was time to run off and in a good moment I said to the master,

“*Massaro Michele*, can you give the month’s five *lire* to me instead of my mother ? When my brothers see money in her hands they have it off her right away and I’m always left with nothing !”

By this time, whatever I said he believed me right enough. I convinced him to give me the money. It was no use me running off either from Giurfo or Mazzarrone because the master could catch me – the escape had to be by night and from Grammichele.

One fine evening I was told,

“Vincenzo, get to bed right away, tomorrow at one we’re leaving for Mazzarrone. Get bread, wine, cheese and olives and get the mules’ bags ready.”

I answered “Yessir” and went off to bed.

After five minutes, as usual, *Signora Carmela* came to see if I was all right for blankets and I pretended to be asleep. Two hours later, when it was quiet everywhere, I got up and slowly opened the door of the stable. The weather was perfect, there was a moon and a fine, clear sky – no people were passing on the road and there wasn't a sound. I took a small canvas sack the size of a soldier's haversack, I filled it with food and off I went. What a lot of nasty jobs I had done in that house, from sweeping out the stable to being a spy – and now here I was having to run off like a thief in the night !

“That's why this bully Aledda came as far as Chiaramonte to look for a farmhand,” I thought, “because in Grammichele everyone knows him and not even the poorest families in the place would send him a lad !”

It might have been ten or eleven in the evening and all the roads were dark, there were only two paraffin lamps in the main square. Luckily I knew the way well, I had fixed it in my mind lots of times, so I walked fast. I left the village without meeting so much as a dog and took the track that leads to Granieri. While the fine moon was lighting the way for me I was thinking,

“If I can cross the river before one o'clock, I'm safe !”

That was the time that swine of Aledda got up and I was sure if he didn't find me he might come looking for me with the mule. He was such a fiend that if he found me he was capable of battering me to death. So I walked fast and never stopped, not even to piss.

When I saw the Dirillo at last I was overjoyed. There was no bridge so, shoes and all, I waded into the water. At Dicchiara there was a big building where the tobacconist was and the warehouse, where all the carters stopped off on the way to Vittoria and Catania. I knew the owner well, *Massaro Vanni 'Nzeca*.

When our house in Chiaramonte collapsed, my father took a piece of land of his for sharefarming at Cicimia. We sold the broken-down house for a miserable fifty *lire* and we all moved into the countryside. *Massaro Vanni* also had a store at the Dicchiara where he sold all sorts of things : pasta, tools, seeds – so we always bought from him. I remember the first year at Cicimia we only managed to produce five hundred kilos of oil and what's more we had to sell it cheap at 35 *lire* a hundred – not even enough to pay the rent ! For three years my father worked only to pay off the debts – that's why he got ill with pneumonia. And that's why I'm always cursing the Almighty, because if he really does exist, he never showed up for my father ! Anyway, we paid the debts with *Massaro 'Nzeca* right down to the last *soldo* and as he has always rightly said,

“The Rabitos are poor, but they pay up !”

When I got to the Dicchiara I felt I was already home – I knew everyone and me and Raffaele, *Massaro Vanni's* son, were friends. I knocked at the tobacconist's door and after five minutes *Massaro Vanni* came to open it, thinking I was a carter wanting to buy cigarettes. At the sight of me, he crossed himself and said,

“Vincenzo – what are you doing here at this time – what's up, have you had a fight with your mother ?”

His wife came out too, she crossed herself as well and said,

“*Maria Santissima* – it’s the son of that poor soul Turiddu Rabito ?!”

They took me in, they made me put on a pair of dry trousers of Raffaele’s and right away they heated up for me a plate of left-over chickpeas, while I told them everything that had happened. In the meantime, my friend Raffaele had got up too, and kept passing me the flask of wine, telling me,

“Drink up, Vincenzo, it’ll do you good !”

When I was feeling much better, *Massaro Vanni* said to me,

“Go and sleep now, Vincenzo, tomorrow morning you’re off to Chiaramonte.”

In the stable there was a length of manger free and I settled down there with a sack of straw for a pillow. Only my pal Raffaele didn’t want to leave me and just *had* to know if there was a cinematograph at Grammichele. When his mother came at last to tell him off, I managed to get two hours of sleep.

I woke up at daybreak with all the carters making a row. I thanked them and said goodbye, then took the road to Chiaramonte. Walking on and on, I realised I was passing near the place of one of my mother’s sister’s, aunt Peppa.

“I’ll go and see her now,” I thought, “Let’s see if I can’t get something out of her !”

I hid the food sack in a cave and went to my aunt’s place empty-handed. The poor soul asked me a load of questions, how my mother was, what I was doing so early in those parts ; I didn’t tell her anything about Grammichele, I only said I was visiting my friend Raffaele ‘Nzeca. She gave me ten eggs and, as I had seen an old cockerel with a broken leg in the yard, I was cheeky enough to ask,

“Why don’t you give us that cockerel, aunt Peppa ? He’s too old and tough for you and uncle Mariano with your teeth, but we can grind stones with ours !”

She laughed and said,

“Go on then, take that cock home – and God bless you all !”

I blew her a kiss and went off happy as a sandboy.

On the way I sucked two eggs that were cracked and washed them down with a good swig of wine because I felt a bit tired. Set up again, I hurried on till I got to the village.

As soon as she saw me all sweaty and with a bad cough, my mother burst into tears and set about making me a cup of hot, sugared wine. The poor thing was sure I was in for pneumonia, just like my father. I lay down and told her everything that had happened to me.

“You did right to run off, my lad,” she said, “Just let him come asking for his dues, the fool, I’ll show him a thing or two !”

In the meantime, aunt Peppa’s cockerel went hopping round the room and my brother Giovannni caught it and wrung its neck. Then we plucked it and put it to boil in the pan. Every so often my brothers lifted the lid and pinched a piece of meat. I watched them from the bed and I reckoned that if I didn’t do something there’d be nothing left for me, so I got up and started eating, hungry as a lion. In no time, there were only bones left in the pan and in the evening we had another good meal with the broth. My mother was still amazed how I had got aunt Peppa to give me that cockerel ; in all her life, she’d never been able to get so much as a pin out of her !

What poverty there was then, in Chiaramonte – but it was twice as bad in our family, without a father !

There was a lot of snow in the winter of 1913 and every day we lads would go and collect it at Arcibessi, to sell it at one *soldo* a ball. In this way we could earn five *lire* during the Christmas period. We brought four to our mother and with eighteen *soldi* we bought a dog called “Gioiosa” which became a consolation to us.

In April 1914, Giovanni and I decided to go to Raddusa, where people said there was a lot of work. I remember someone called Vanni Scifo came with us, a bullying, argumentative little bloke. He went around with a knife in his pocket and was always going on about slashing this or that one’s face.

We took Gioiosa with us too and the little ones cried ever so much about it. We went round by Caltagirone so we wouldn’t pass by Grammichele where I was afraid of meeting that bastard Aledda. Then we went to Piazza Armerina where we were lucky enough to get rid of Vannino Scifo. He stopped off at a relative’s, so there was no more going on about having to fight with everyone. When we got to Raddusa, we went right away to find someone from Chiaramonte called Lauria, a great friend of our father’s. He had some land where he’d planted beans and when he heard we were looking for work he said,

“You do the weeding lads, and I’ll pay you a *lira* a day !”

Altogether we spent a month in the Raddusa area and managed to earn twenty *lire* each. Gioiosa was always with us and we even took her to bed at night. Then she got mangy and the master wanted to put her down. We had to leave her in the middle of the countryside and we went off to Catenanuova where we could take the train for Catania. I remember that there were three hours to wait for the direct train from Castrogiovanni and we settled down to wait, sitting on a wall. All of a sudden we saw Gioiosa coming, barking – who knows how she must have run around looking for us ! When the health official at the station saw her all mangy, he took her by the rope and shot her in the head. I’ll never forget the grief I felt !

In Catania Giovanni and me first of all shared out the money ; but that fool of a brother of mine used up his twenty *lire* on whores and the Marionette Theatre ! I sent a postal order for fifteen *lire* instead to our mother, and got by on the rest. Once Giovanni said to me,

“ If I don’t enjoy myself when I have money, when can I ?!”

Knowing him, I answered,

“Just as long as you don’t come asking me to lend you some when it’s all gone !”

We set on each other and ended up on the ground in the middle of the street, bringing a lot of people running. When they found out we were brothers they all said,

“Oh, brothers are you ? – well then, break each other’s bones as much as you like !”

It was in that period that we paid our first visit to the *pension* of Donna Valduzza in San Cristoforo. How many times I ate and slept in that little 10-bed lodging ! It was there where I first heard people talking about Socialism and even

though I was illiterate I understood right away that Socialism was the only real hope of the working people.

Piano Fortino was the meeting place for the farm-workers of Catania, so lots of agents went there looking for labourers. Someone called Vincenzo Funaro sent us to Cuccummedda, to don Gaetano Lo Monaco, where we went hay-making at one-and-a-half *lire* a day.

That summer we took the train back to Catenanuova and then went around lots of villages : Carrapepe, Leonforte, Villadoro, Pietraperzia.... we even went as far as Gangi in Madonie, where we had a bad experience.

We were on piecework, which means that the work is calculated by quantity, not by hours. In the end we had earned three *lire* a day and the crook of a master didn't want to pay us because he said we were too young to be earning so much. We went to report him to the *Carabinieri* and the idiot of a police chief told us,

“How can you have earned three *lire* a day – even I don't get that much as chief of police ! Get out of here or I'll put you inside !”

So, that was how the world was made up, all against the workers !

We had to accept two *lire* a day and even had to thank the master for it ; the law was all on his side.

Anyway, at the end of that summer we went home with fifty *lire* which helped my poor mother a lot.

The next year war broke out and my brother Giovanni was called up. Then it was revoked because he wasn't tall enough and my mother was relieved.

“My sons won't be soldiers,” she said to the neighbours, “they're too short !”

In fact we were known in Chiaramonte as “*Mezzocoppo*” which means really short in stature.

My sister Turidda was going to school and she had an allowance and a reading book. I got the idea that I was going to learn to read and write by myself and I managed this in a short time. When I wrote for the first time, on a page from an exercise book, the word VIVERA, who was a workmate of mine, I felt like I'd won the lottery. At last I knew the alphabet and what numbers meant. Now I could read the newspaper and understand what was happening at the Front, where every day hundreds of soldiers were dying. And I could add up bills by myself, without fear of being taken for a ride.

Men were leaving for the war continually and in Chiaramonte the more who went away, the easier it was to find work. My family began to live better. Vito was already fourteen and so there were three of us going to work by then. Of the others, my sister Turidda was in the fourth class of primary school, Paolo was in the second and then there were two other little sisters, Peppinedda and Lucia. My mother felt herself rallying after so many years of poverty. She was even putting money aside, to be able to buy a house one day and give her daughters a dowry. But, as we know, the accounts of the poor never balance !

We spent the year 1916 in comfort, while the war at the Front was getting more and more fierce.

I liked dancing and wearing good clothes and I was already looking around to find myself a girlfriend. The year 1917 looked promising, for me and for my family; bit by bit we seemed to be clambering out of poverty at last. We were called, all three brothers, to the *Contessa*, between Gela and Vittoria, to spend two months pruning the vines for five *lire* a day.

“This year,” I thought, “I can have some new clothes for the *festa* of Maria di Gulfi !”

We spent the first two weeks working for the *Contessa* and then we went back to Chiaramonte for the Carnival. It was Sunday 18 February 1917 and in our house there was a big dinner with *maccheroni* and pork sauce, lard and beans. In those hard times it wasn't everyday that you ate pasta ! There was a lively feeling around the boiling pan that day and we were all sitting around the table with my mother, who had never been so happy.

At a certain point we heard someone knocking at the door and when my mother went to open it she found a corporal from the *Carabinieri* in front of her.

“Don't be scared, *signora*,” he said, “Does Vincenzo Rabito live here ?”

“He's my son !” she answered, all afraid.

“On the 20 February,” said the messenger, “Vincenzo Rabito must go to the Recruiting Centre at Siracusa. Here's the call-up card. Tomorrow evening he must be ready in the square, otherwise we'll come and get him ourselves !”

How it all turned sour, that damned Carnival meal !

That day there were thirty-five called up in the village of Chiaramonte, from those born in the first four months of '99. Some of us lads weren't even eighteen yet. Some lived in the village but most lived in the countryside, so the mayor sent two special messengers to tell the reclutes. One was Paolo il Cavallaro, who handled the auction of mules when someone's business failed, and the other was Paolo Fortunato, who publicised the price of fish with his drum for the fish market. These two Paolos had loud voices and the local council used them to take urgent messages, especially when someone died in the village and the family lived in the countryside.

All hell broke out throughout Chiaramonte on that Carnival Sunday in 1917. Nobody expected such a sudden call-up for lads who were so young. But it was no use crying, whether we wanted or not we had to go and there was no way out of it !