

RODDY BARRY

Giancarlo

The roadway ran in front, straight, wide and in good condition. When they had gone along it for half a mile, they could hear a muffled roar, the noise of boring engines. They could see nothing. A hundred yards from where the men were working ahead, they stopped, took off their jackets and put them down among the others. On again, walking more slowly and with great care as the ground grew rougher and the road narrowed. Now the noise of the engines grew, bursting at them, beating against itself, waves of sound packing into the small space. The two men looked at each other, hands on ears, grinning. They went into the noise, probing the wet haze ahead with their lamps. There were other lights in there, moving about obscurely. They walked towards them into the mist.

'Right!', someone yelled, 'The afternoon men are here. Home time.'

One boring engine stopped, then the other. The mist thinned.

'It's the Ities,' said the same voice and turned toward the first of the two Italians. 'Enrico. Where's Bill and Bernard?'

'On their way. Missed the first Paddy train.' Enrico knelt down and squatted on his heels. He was short, a small, square body on which sat a small head. His face was lined and tight. In contrast, the face of his mate, Giancarlo, shone like a pond, a face where his feelings spread out as soon as he had them. He was an outsize, powerful man and willingly lent his strength to any collier who asked for it, a quality his mates appreciated. And although a great talker in Italian, in English he couldn't find the words. Therefore, he listened to what they said. Giancarlo was popular.

The men squatted down now around the Joy loader, arguing about the day's work. Giancarlo, uninterested, wandered out of the circle of light, picking up stones and hurling them at the steel arches caught in the beam of his lamp. He kicked one of the boring engines. 'Noisy wet animal, YOU are. Going wrong, too, always.' He stared angrily at the machine. 'Five years with YOU,' he said to it, 'Enrico says five years. Then we go home. Too long five years.' He kicked it again. 'Too long. I will go sooner.' He turned it over with his foot and it glinted at him in the wet. 'Animal.'

'Ho! Carlo! Ne'er mind talkin' to yourself - go an' talk to Hubert. Tell him we're ready to fire.' The light flashed at Giancarlo impatiently. He turned round to go, tripped over the engine at his feet and fell full-length in the oily water. He swore savagely in Italian. The men at the Joy loader rolled about with laughter.

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'You're too big for a pit, lad, too big,' one of them said.

'Awkward?' said Giancarlo.

'Aye, that's it, awkward,' they grinned at each other. 'Hubert'll be on the face back yonder. An' Carlo, hurry, mind - Bill'll be wanting to fire when he comes.'

Giancarlo nodded and trotted off. At the belt end one of the young trainees was starting to push a full mine car away. 'Ho,' yelled Giancarlo, 'I shall take it. Leave off.' He leapt on the coupling, and the car, on the brink of a slight slope, began to slide slowly forward.

'Brake's at t'other end!' shouted the trainee, 'Watch it.'

Giancarlo jumped off the back of the car, ran alongside it and clambered on the front coupling. The brake was on but the car still moved too quickly.

'Bloody brakes!' Giancarlo said aloud, 'they should work.' Ahead he saw the points switched the wrong way. 'Now THOSE!', he shouted and ran for the points. Suddenly his leg tugged at him. His foot was caught between the rails. He pulled at it in great excitement: jammed his boot more firmly. He twisted back to look: the mincar came forward, still very slowly, soundless. He leant toward it, stretching out his hands, then as it forced them back, he threw all his weight desperately against it: the coupling pushed his stomach in, the grid shoved at his shin and for a moment he thought he was going down before it, underneath. But the car stopped. Giancarlo untied his boot laces, twisted his foot out and released the boot. He took his lamp from his helmet, caught it by its cable and whirled it wildly around his head. On his one booted foot he hopped down the track from sleeper to sleeper, his light flashing joyfully in the blackness. Round and round went the light, round and round, and Giancarlo shouted in celebration.

'Ho! Are you right up there? Owt wrong?'

'O.K.! Ha! Yes!' Giancarlo bellowed back, 'That Hubert?'

Silence. An answer to idiots waving their lights.

Giancarlo grinned and sat down on the rail to put his boot on. Then he went on down the tunnel and found Hubert collecting his shot-firing tackle.

'It's you, is it?' shouted Hubert, 'Where's your sense? Rantin' an' flashin' your light. What's up?' In spite of the stillness, Hubert shouted. Outside the pit he talked normally: at work, never. He shouted and when there was noise his voice climbed and he squealed like a pig. Also like a pig, he had short legs and a fat behind.

Giancarlo tried to explain about his foot and the mincar. Hubert would have none of it.

'Hell fire! - you're a mad bugger, right. I've told you time and again - you're not to bloody-well ride on those cars. You'll get yourself lamed. No Compo - you know that?' he poked his detonator tin at Giancarlo, 'An' I'll get all the stick. YOU don't care, do you? No. Manager'll come tearin' up here: "What's he ridin' on the cars for, Taylor?" he'll say. I can see him now ... Willie.' He brooded on the Manager's name. 'But what does Johncarlo care? He doesn't care a frog. Do you?' he poked Giancarlo again, 'Bloody Ities, all the same,' he grinned happily at Giancarlo. 'An' I'll bet you've brought no spice to chew now, have you, you dozy sod, have you?' Hubert had grown fat since being a Deputy: others steamed with sweat, Hubert watched them and all day long he chewed sweets, usually someone else's.

Giancarlo rummaged in his pocket, brought out half a humbug and started to examine it in his light.

'I knew it!' said Hubert triumphantly 'Thousands of 'em. Give it here.' He snatched it and popped it into his mouth.

Two more lights joined them. It was Bill and Bernard and they were in a hurry. Bernard walked straight past, but Bill stopped and looked at Giancarlo.

'Carlo. How many holes have they bored yonder?'

'Thirty-nine.'

'That'll have to do, then. We're not goin' to bugger about. Dets there, Hubert?'

'Course they're bloody dets!', Hubert waved his detonator tin about, 'An' I'm ready to fire - it's you Contract men that's late. Anyroad you'll not be ready yet a while. I've to have a talk to Johncarlo.'

Bill looked at them and snorted. 'Always yappin', you two are always yappin'. What do you find to yap about, eh?'

'Oh, owt,' said Hubert airily, 'owt.'

'OWT!' - Bill gave a great shout of laughter - 'Owt? Neither of you's got an idea what t'other's saying. Nowt more like.'

'Ignorance,' said Hubert.

'Mind, you've time,' Bill went on, 'time to yap, Deputies. Your money's in the tin on Fridays. We've to work for ours.'

'Get on with it, then.'

'Aye, that shot's to be down by three - mind you're not long, Hubert.' They glared at each other, clowning, and Bill tramped off in the direction of work. Happy to leave it, the Day Shift passed him going the other way. Hubert and Giancarlo were left by themselves.

'You don't want to mind about HIM,' Hubert announced, 'I'll admit he's a good worker - I'll give him that - but he's ignorant.

'Course, come to that, I'm not much better myself,' he laughed so much at this the humbug caught in his throat. Giancarlo thumped his back for him.

'Johncarlo! Rotten bloody spice - it's chokin' me. I might have known, comin' from you. D'you have humbugs in Italy?' he didn't stop for an answer. 'Now but what I want to know is, what about this place ... Florenzy? That's where you lived, eh?'

'Yes. Firenze.'

'Firenzy. What's it like there, then?'

'Well...' Giancarlo found it hard to answer. Hubert was forever asking him about Italy, where he lived, what work he'd done. Giancarlo stumbled over his answers, which made not the slightest difference to Hubert, who kept asking questions, mostly the same ones.

'It was warm there,' Giancarlo said, 'not like here. Summer you call that?' He pointed his light at the roof - through it - into the fields above. 'And no pits, you know. In the evenings we could walk in the town.' He hesitated again. 'But we drink wine, you know.'

'No PUBS! You've no pubs.' Hubert danced up and down. 'I know that. What do you do in the evenings?'

'Oh, nothing the same there, warm. Walk, and we have ...'

'You can't walk all bloody evenin'. Do you have clubs, like here, then?'

'Cafes, we have, cafes.'

'Caffees! Ne'er mind, lad. An' you worked on the buildin' sites?'

Giancarlo waited awkwardly. 'Well...', he said, 'I did not work always. I have told you. It was difficult to work sometimes.'

'I know that, lad, you don't have to look daft. Same here before the war. We was on three days in the pits - an' that was good, you know.' He paused. 'Now we've our jobs for a bit, you've come to take 'em - that's it, eh?' Hubert shouted with laughter at the look on Giancarlo's face. 'Johncarlo! You'll never learn.' He looked into Giancarlo's face. 'J.O.K.E.', he spelled it out, 'Joke. Come on, lad, now come on.' He peered at Giancarlo again. 'Nay, lad, smile, do. Right, don't then. We'd best get some work done,' and he turned round to set off up the roadway.

Giancarlo crept up behind him, seized him as though he were a piglet and hoisted him high in the air.

'You mad bloody Itie! PUT ME DOWN,' Hubert squealed at the top of his voice. Giancarlo carried the struggling little Deputy toward a minecar, and popped him in on top of the muck.

'J.O.K.E.' he announced.

When they arrived at the head of the roadway, Bill and Bernard were waiting impatiently. Hubert worked very fast and in

an hour the face was charged with explosive and ready to fire. They took shelter two hundred yards further back in a double manhole. Hubert leaned out, flashing his light down the roadway.

'Fire!' he squealed.

A dull series of brrumps followed quickly one after the other. They had to wait now for the air to clear at the head of the roadway. Already the white powder fumes were drifting slowly past them.

'It'll be above half an hour before you get started.' Hubert said, 'I've to go an' have a look at the conveyors on No. 7,' he paused and squinted down at Bill. 'Can I take Johncarlo?'

Giancarlo jumped up, ready to go at once.

'Hell fire! - do what you like,' said Bill, 'only we'll need Carlo when we start shifting that muck, so mind you're back in time.'

'We'll not be gone that long.' Hubert picked up his tackle. He gave Giancarlo his firing battery to carry: the heaviest thing he had to hand.

They went away together down the roadway, Hubert waddling two strides to Giancarlo's one. At the gate to the coal face Hubert dumped his tackle. They went on toward No. 7 and came to a junction, where a smaller conveyor joined the main one. A button man was usually there to control the conveyors, but now the junction was deserted.

Occasional lumps of muck flopped from the small conveyor on to the big one. The two belts hummed together, the main one low and steady, the other higher. It was almost a harmony. The noise beat at their ears, making the drums ring.

'Now then, Johncarlo,' Hubert shouted, 'this is it. You see those there?' he flitted his lamp beam over the three cast-iron driving drums. The belt slid round them in a gleaming arc. The third drum, which lay within the safety guard, took most of the strain. The belt was taut round it, skintight.

Hubert got down on his knees, pulled the safety guard away and flashed his light inside the moving drum.

'Willie's been moanin' about the belt gettin' chavelled. There's probably some muck caught ... tearin' at it ... round these drums somewhere. Best wait till the belt stops.' It was nearly time for the afternoon break. 'I'll have another humbug - you've thousands there, I know.'

'But I have none, Hubert.'

'We'll have to make do with mine, then,' said Hubert. He pulled an enormous bag of sweets from his pocket, rummaged inside, found half a humbug and gave it to Giancarlo. 'We're square now then,' he announced and took three whole ones for

himself, popping them into his mouth all at once.

The high pitched whine of the smaller conveyor cut out. The belt slowed to a stop.

'They'll be eatin' their bread an' jam now,' said Hubert, 'we've ten minutes.' He crawled into the belt and poked at the stone lodged above the drum.

Hubert had to get between the belt and the driving drum to get at the stone. He hammered at it. It wouldn't shift. Giancarlo crouched watching. Thick shadows played over Hubert's face, thrown up by his lamp, which he'd placed between his feet. He hammered and cursed. The main conveyor drowned his words.

Suddenly a higher whine cut in. The belt he was in moved. Hubert's arms and legs thrashed wildly. His head was caught, dragged in. The conveyor crushed it. His frenzied jerking stopped. His fat little body was left, trailing, held by his head, squelched between belt and drum.

Giancarlo missed the stop button at his first jab, got it the second. The belt stopped and the big one cut out. Silence.

Hubert's light stayed on, jammed now between convulsed feet. It shone up, the yellow beam floodlighting the mess on the drum. Giancarlo stood and stared. He shivered. He crept towards the drum until his face was a few inches from it. He reached out a hand to touch it, then snatched it away and turned to run. He couldn't. He stopped, took a few steps back, turned out his own light and stood still, watching.

The button man who came to see why the belt had stopped, didn't see Giancarlo at first, and when he did, he could get no answers from him. He got on to the pit phone at once. First the next junction answered, next the Paddy station, finally he got the Manager at pit top.

'Willie? ... Hubert Taylor's got himself caught in the drivin' drum on No. 7. ... His head's crushed in ... yes ... dead.' A pause. 'With him? ... one of the Ities, Carlo, I think. ... Right. ... I'll wait.' He put the phone back and turned to Giancarlo.

'The Manager's comin' with a stretcher party.' A pause. 'It's a bad do,' he hesitated, 'are you alright, lad?' He put his arm across the Italian's shoulder. Giancarlo stared fixedly at the drum.

'Hubert shouldn't have gone in there like that. We'd only stopped for a minute. What did he do it for?'

Everything was still. The dark and the silence pushed in on them. The button man shifted about.

'Here, have a mouthful of this, lad.' He held out a bottle of cold tea. Giancarlo didn't move.

'What happened? Why did he ... ' Silence. 'Well, then, I think

I'd best go off an' see if anyone's comin.' He paused. 'You'll be alright here, lad?' He got up and went off toward the Paddy station.

Twenty minutes later the accident party arrived: four men, a stretcher and the Manager. Giancarlo remained exactly as the **button** man had left him, still, silent and staring. The Manager measured everything up for the accident report. They had to run the belt backwards to free Hubert. The Manager threw dirt hurriedly over the sticky redness on the drum.

During this time Giancarlo didn't speak: he hardly moved. He stood in the dark on the edge of the group of men, watching. The **Manager** tried him for an account of the accident, but gave up quickly. Statements would have to be taken later anyway. It could wait.

The stretcher was picked up. They started off, walking with **difficulty**, slowly, stumbling every few yards, lights jerking and jumping over the walls and the floor, calling out to one another to keep their movements together. Then the Manager realized Giancarlo was not with them. He stopped and looked back toward the junction: no light, no sound, no movement.

'Go on. I'll catch you up at the Paddy station.' He turned away from the stretcher party and went back.

Giancarlo was still there. He'd moved nearer the drum and was scratching away the dirt which the Manager had thrown over it. Now he poked beneath the dirt. The Manager seized him by the shoulder and forced him round.

'You're coming bloody OUT!' he shouted, 'Stop that.'

Giancarlo looked round. 'He's there,' he said.

The Manager pushed Giancarlo ahead of him, forcing him away. They left the junction like that: the huge form of Giancarlo in front, still without his light, behind, the little Manager, pushing and shoving, shining his light for both of them.

The bus pulled into the pit yard the next afternoon, a leaping stream of colliers coming from its side. It drove round in a stately semi-circle and stopped. The last two men got off: Enrico and Giancarlo. They walked slowly across the yard, Enrico talking against Giancarlo's silence. He couldn't find a way to break it. He went on urgently talking. They reached the pit baths and walked on the concrete between the rows of lockers.

'Bloody Ities ... yap, yap, yap,' a friendly face grinned at them. Enrico looked but didn't hear.

'Giancarlo, we shall be late,' he said, in English now.

They took off their clothes, hung them in the clean lockers and trotted through the showers to the other side of the baths, the

dirty side, where the pit clothes were. In three minutes they were by the shaft, shuffling into the pit cage with the last group of men.

They got off the Paddy train underground and began the long walk to Shakers Drift. The tunnel was the same, the dark, the lamp beams flitting about. All the same, the same as yesterday. Then a rat, caught in a shaft of light, squinted at it and tried to hide itself under the loose stones. But Enrico moved heavily after it, shouting at Giancarlo to help him kill it. Giancarlo loved to kill rats. He was so good at it, he could have done it for a living. The rat broke cover as the light brightened around it, trying to reach the darkness at the other side of the roadway. It jumped to clear the rail: Enrico's pick caught it there on the steel: a sandwich of rat and glistening rail.

¹ Giancarlo! I've got it!' Enrico turned round joyfully. No light. He swivelled and looked up the roadway. Giancarlo's light was a hundred yards away and it jogged faster jerkily. He was running. Enrico ran after him between the rails, his legs too short to stride two sleepers as Giancarlo did.

'Giancarlo! I'm coming. Wait.'

Giancarlo ran on. At the end of the roadway he entered the noise, the high roar of the boring engines, and felt the wetness of the mist on his skin. They had already started to bore. The conveyor was running, but its end was clogged with loose stone and slime.

'Carlo,' Bill said, 'would you mind cleanin' up round the belt? You an' Henry can start t'other engine then.' He paused hopefully. 'We've just to clear that muck, you see, lad?'

Giancarlo got down on his knees without a word. He planted his knees wide apart and sat back on his heels, staring at the moving conveyor. Then he picked up a shovel and started to work. There was no rhythm in the work. He attacked the pile of muck, stabbing in; jerked back: jarred shoulder muscles. The belt hummed by endlessly. Clumps of soggy stone slid from Giancarlo's shovel, caught his light in mid-air as he turned to throw, and squelched on the belt. Each shovelful of muck was drawn quickly, evenly out of sight. That was how the belt ran: evenly gleaming, like nothing else in the pit. Jagged roof, twisted girders, bucking, clanging shovels - these were different. The belt ran evenly, gleaming, humming to itself.

Enrico came up to where Giancarlo was working and watched him silently.

'O.K., Giancarlo?' softly.

Giancarlo said nothing. He went on with his work. Every time he turned to throw, he watched the belt sliding by.

Enrico moved off, back into the mist around the boring engines. The high roar and the mist cut off the three of them - Bill, Bernard and Enrico - placed them away, swirled in spray and roar. They shouted to each other from time to time, but only when they had to. For much of the time, they stood watching the drill bore into the stone, revolving, shuddering its way in. The racket hammered all round them: minds withdrew, shrank, senses dulled. They stood, staring vacantly, like cows.

Then Giancarlo screamed. Once. Twice.

The three men gaped at each other.

A third time he screamed, a scream of terror.

Enrico jerked round and ran back. He caught Giancarlo in his lamp beam, standing there, enormous, his pick held high above his head, threatening the belt.

'He's there!' Giancarlo screamed, 'he's there.'

'Giancarlo!'

'On the belt. Get him off! Get him off!'

Two more lights jerked up alongside Enrico's, Bill and Bernard shadowy behind them.

Giancarlo struck savagely down at the belt with his pick. The point pierced the belting and jammed: the conveyor snatched the pick from his hands and swept it away. Giancarlo's voice rose to a frenzy.

'Get him off!' He whirled round on the three of them. 'YOU!' he screamed, 'Get him off!' They stared blankly. 'Then I will!' he jumped for the belt. They held him for a moment, but he tore free and leapt on the moving conveyor, running along it. Enrico scrambled after him. Bill flashed his light frantically up the roadway, signalling the button man to stop the conveyor.

Giancarlo bounded over the belt. He leapt. The steel girder caught him just above the forehead, violently wrenching his neck. The belt carried his feet from under him: the impact threw his body the other way. He fell full-length backwards, exactly in the middle of the belt. Enrico reached him first.

The accident party arrived later: the same men, the Manager, darting his light over everything, asking angry questions.

'Well, what was he doing to get a crack like that?' The second accident in two days. He was nervous, ready to accuse anybody. 'And where were the rest of you? Why did you let him get on there?'

'I'm tellin' you ... he ran amok. Can't you see?' Bill repeated, 'kept yellin' Hubert Taylor was after him.'

'What do you mean by that? What do you mean - ran amok?'

'Well, chantin' an' yellin' like a madman. You'd expect ... '

'And I'll tell you this,' the Manager interrupted, looking down at Giancarlo, 'he's finished in this pit.'

Enrico looked up and stared at him. The Manager paid no attention.

'Once they get like that, they're dangerous. He might go off again. You can't tell, you know.' He paused. 'Well, come on. Let's get him out.'

Giancarlo was put on the stretcher. They lifted it up and began the slow journey down the tunnel. Enrico followed them for a few paces, then stopped and stayed where he was, watching their lights go, until the last yellow flicker disappeared and only the blackness remained.