

Introduction

Ottavio Bottecchia died on June 15, 1927. Ninety years have since passed, but he has not faded into oblivion. If you pause to listen, you can hear the faint sound of his breath. The echoes of his horn, echoing through the mountains, the great horn of Orlando.

Bottecchia does not merely belong to the histories of sport or Italy, but in the tales of heroic deeds. His accomplishments are too great for reporters, they should be told by the poets. He emerged at the time of the "giants of the road". Audacious and pure, defying the ambushes.

The bicycle was his sword, the Excalibur next to which he died. The mountain roads of Friuli were his battleground.

Throughout Bottecchia's life, heroism, mystery and tragedy are all interwoven with glorious embellishment. If Bartali was the champion of faith, then Bottecchia was the hero of war. If Bartali was the river Jordan, then Bottecchia was the Piave. Bartali was like a crusader, he had an army at his back and God on his side. Bottecchia stood alone, an embodiment of all these values. Face to face with Rommel at the Tagliamento. He was the prisoner that escaped three times.

He was the champion of migrants. His footsteps have been traced by millions of Italians. Those who were cannon fodder. Those with cardboard suitcases. Those who crossed boundaries and challenged the unknown. Those who, instead of a bank account, had two counsellors: dreams and despair. First Carnera has her own shoes. They leave heavy footprints.

He was the man of metamorphosis. Fausto Coppi was the archetype of cycling. Though Coppi won the Giro d'Italia at twenty; Bottecchia conquered the Giro d'Italia at thirty, straying even further away from his roots. He entered a land, foreign to him, and came out as a Sun King: his metamorphosis was even more remarkable.

Coppi became the Heron, the king of the rice fields. Bottecchia became "Le Vautour Fauve", the Vulture, the Griffon, the mountain bird. He always lived on the edge of extinction; threatened, wronged. Yet he was invincible on the mountains where Orlando's paladin perished.

The war is something that Coppi and Bottecchia share in their mutual history. Coppi was immediately captured and, being mild, he accepted his imprisonment. Bottecchia rebelled, escaped three times, then fought for four years. He was indomitable, invincible.

They both shared a common fragility. For Coppi this was down to genetics: his bones were like breadsticks. Bottecchia's fragility was linked to courage: he breathed in asphyxiating gas without running away. Coppi caught malaria on safari, Bottecchia fought on the Piave.

Coppi blossomed before the war, whereas Bottecchia emerged after a terrible war that had fertilised his land with blood. He was born from the rubble, from the deepest despair.

Coppi saw the light in Castellania, a fairy tale village. It is immediately designed for the realm of fantasy. Bottecchia, on the other hand, was the "mangy crow", born in the mud. Only by great deeds did he enter the fairy tale. He gave the downtrodden, the miserable and the unlucky an extraordinary possibility, a dream.

Both Coppi and Bottecchia were caught up in the throes of tragedy. They are worthy of Aeschylus, rather than Alexandre Dumas. The story of Coppi, however, is a wonderful silk tapestry that is eventually torn. The story of Bottecchia is interwoven with barbed wire from its beginning.

Bottecchia was built upon pain and despair. He was the hero of loneliness. He always fought, even on days of glory, like Michelangelo's prisoners, like Laocoon, like Saint Sebastian. Coppi is irreplaceable, that goes without saying. Bottecchia's sporting quality, however, was undeniable. He won two Tours, as did Bartali and Coppi. But he was the one to break the mould, not Girardengo, not Brunero, and not Binda. It was Bottecchia who paved the way for Bartali and Coppi.

He wore the famous yellow jersey for 34 days, compared to the 23 days of the immense Bartali and the 19 of Coppi, the greatest runner ever. He is not only the most successful Italian in the history of the Giro d'Italia, he is also the greatest.

He is a shining light in the darkness. The mystery surrounding him gives shape to the heroes of his story. We want our words to spread this story, shedding light on this sporting legend and his history.

This book is not intended as an epic though, but as a *tranche de vie*, a piece of life. It is not some kind of long-preserved ancient relic or text, to be read over an altar. It bleeds, and it belongs to the wonderful and cruel adventure that is life.

In the eighth canto of the *Odyssey*, Homer claims that the gods weave misfortune so that future generations can write songs about it. We who, following Bottecchia, have heard Orlando's horn in the Pyrenees, are here to sing a lengthy song.

CHAPTER ONE

THE GREAT WAR

1. The Musket Shot

Pyrenees, July 2, 1924

Bayonne is awake. It's the middle of the night and everyone is in the street. Even the wondrous view of Ingres's shoulders turns curious and, stealthily, escapes from the frame. Released by the mantle, he goes out past the Bonnat museum. Beautiful and mysterious, he wants to greet the departing king.

The king is adorned in yellow livery, yet has no crown. He is not preceded by a trumpeter, nor followed by a procession of serving boys. He does not expect genuflection. He wears simple goggles, like a motorcyclist, in spite of the dust. His steed does not whinny. He is not decked out in regal gifts or fineries.

Bottecchia is a silent monarch. There is nothing obviously noble about him. He bears no seal nor standard, no glorious or illustrious family tree in his wake. His nose has an air of royalty, but he is not the last of a long line of noble noses and has not been painted by Velazquez.

He rides proudly through the streets. The paradox is that he comes from Italy, the land of the Grand Tour. Though like Caesar, he wants to conquer Gaul, yet has not uttered that fateful phrase: *Alea iacta est* - the die has been cast. He crossed the Piave in silence.

Bottecchia comes from the Great War. In 1923 he was the first Italian to don the yellow jersey now he's been wearing it for ten days. He won it in the first leg at Le Havre, in the North, on the Channel, and brought it to the south. Now he has to defend it in the mountains.

Bayonne lies on the shore of the Atlantic. The tour has passed through it since 1906, when it was won by Dortignacq the Frenchman, who was the first foreigner to win the Giro d'Italia. There, on the eve of that terrible milestone, Bottecchia discovered the game of pelota, which also inspired Hemingway. They play it there, they drink to it, they love it. Bayonne, however, is an armed city, the birthplace of the bayonet. It is a walled circle of bastions with a ruined castle, a fortress at the foot of the Pyrenees.

Bottecchia is encircled in this stony encampment. Hostile eyes flash around him. Ambushers, covered in darkness, move furtively, ready to attack. Shadows in the night, visible only by brief flashes of light.

Bottecchia is not, however, the first Italian to be leading the Giro d'Italia. Vincenzo Borgarello, in 1912, and Nane Micheletto, in 1913, were in the lead for a day, but the yellow jersey was not introduced until 1919.

The Pyrenees invoke fear. They were fatal to Orlando's paladin. Rising like dark and terrible monoliths, motionless under a starry sky. This came to light on 19 July 1910 in Perpignan-Luchon, 289km, and two days later in Luchon-Bayonne, 326km.

In the first instance, Lapize was the first to scale the summit of the Col de Port. Then, he was the first over the tremendous Portet-d'Aspet, passing with a hundred meter lead and widening the gap by descending down a mule track.

He conquered all the hills with 22x9, which develops into 5,10 meters by pedalling. He won by 18' over Émile Georget and 22' over Faber, the head of his class. The 21st provided the toughest stage, in the forms of Aubisque and Tourmalet.

In the early spring, Alphonse Steines, Desgrange's partner, had been sent there to scout the place out. He found the Avenue of the Aubisque disastrous. Then he went tried Tourmalet, only to be hit by a snowstorm.

Before he was even 4 km from the pass, he had to continue on foot, sinking into the fresh snow. He gambled with his life, going onto the mountain. He returned to Barèges at three o'clock in the morning. Yet, forgetting his ordeal, he telegraphed Desgrange with this surprising message: "Passé Tourmalet. Très bonne route. Parfaitement praticable".

That is how Desgrange, oblivious to the danger, became acquainted with those two mountains on the route. On Tourmalet he alternated between walking and pedalling. When he peeled away on Aubisque at 16' from the escaping François Lafourcade, outraged, he cried to the organizers: "You are murderers!"

He went on to win the stage, beating Pierino Albini. Faber and Trousselier came 10 minutes later. That day, the ninth contestant to cross the line, Vanhouwaert, came after an hour and twenty minutes. The runners had climbed Peyresourde, Aspin, Tourmalet, Aubisque and Col d'Osquich, one after the other. Now the race is done in the opposite direction.

Throughout the long and sleepless night, Bottecchia would prepare his bike, bottles, tires, pliers, tool, mastic, and iron thread. He ate like a wolf. Washing down the Bayonne ham with two glasses of Beaujolais, devouring four hefty slices of beef loin. His seconds comprise of fried bread with eggs.

At midnight, he makes for the starting line. A throng of people, excited and feverish, opens and closes around him. They surround him, almost suffocating, with bright cheering faces. The smell of dried fish is everywhere.

Frantic hands pat him hard on the shoulder blades. Bottecchia, like a threatened sardine, seeks salvation in the crowd.

The contestants have gleaming eyes, burnished skin and carved faces. The race has already taken its toll, thinning them. Their jerseys are unironed, they still have the smell of fresh laundry to them.

The smell of camphorated oil is heavy in the air. Some people are lurking in the shadows, many of them whispering. It's absolute chaos. The languages clash with one another, seeking unlikely common ground between the gentle French and the hard basque, the incomprehensible Flemish and the loud Neapolitan. Bottecchia defends himself in his monosyllabic Goldoni dialect.

On the stroke of two O'clock, he sets off. At the first push of the pedal Bottecchia shakes off the toxins of an infinite stage, Les Sables-d'Olonne-Bayonne, 482 km, twenty hours of riding. With the group sluggishly advancing to the Landes. Passing through the red and white houses that are typical of the basque region, he breathes in the ocean air

Cutting through the black ink of the night, he counts the stars, golden dots on an immense dark mantle that holds up the moon. After only two hours he sees his first glimpse of the dawn as the sun gradually emerges

The group moves slowly, compact, churning up the scree. Ah, potholes! Typical bad luck, the misfortune reduces these knights to mere pedestrians. Changing tack the moonlight is not easy. For now the race is placid though, allowing for easy recovery. It seems like the migration of a great flock, which passes through the mountains onwards to lush pastures.

Nothing of note happens until Eaux-Bonnes, 177 km in. It was the spa resort favoured by Delacroix, the painter who painted Liberty Leading the People, and by Sarah Bernhardt, the principal actress of the Belle Époque. Among the establishments, there are great imposing hotels carved into the hard marble of the Pyrenees, with elegant gardens. To the end there are only four houses, situated on the back of a giant.

Good Waters. The cozy name does not fool me. This is a powder keg, a minefield. Every time the Tour passes, the race explodes. There is a smell of gunpowder on the air. In the sixteenth century, it was called Eaux d'Arquebusades, because it was here that King Francis I had built a military hospital for soldiers of the Béarn wounded in the Battle of Pavia (1525). They were wounded by new

weapons, muskets and rifles. That day, the Spanish riflemen obliterated the heavy French cavalry, men and horses.

The charm of the place stems from the 'langue sifflée', the language of whistling. Pastors still communicate through the valley with whistles, an amazing ancient language, favoured by the natural shape of the valley which carries the sound. Here the group is shattered by a different kind of whistle, even the whistlers of the Pyrénées have never heard it. Strong like the lion's roar racers, like gnu frightened in their migration, lurch forward breathlessly. The hunt is on. The climb has just begun and Bottecchia, in his yellow jersey, is in the lead. The song of heroic deeds begins.

The Pyrenees are called the "Giudici di Pace", the "Judges of Peace". The cyclists come before them, escorted like defendants. They tremble, waiting for the verdict. It is not a pleasurable passage, it is "the calvary of the Tour de France'. You do not breathe, you gasp for air. The Aubisque transforms these giant of the roads into Little Red Riding Hood picturesque maidens.

Glory is born of pain. The bodies twist, standing astride the saddle, dangling in a grotesque dancing ordeal. The bike becomes an instrument of torture. The faces are deformed by screams. The mouths struggle for oxygen, hearts burst in the darkness.

Only Bottecchia seems comfortable, like a Pyrenees mountain goat, leaping through the rocks, moving on thin cords, crossing the abyss. Behind his galloping hooves the group rushes like a swarm heap of rubble.

In the Bottecchia's deeds there is a sense of harmony. His bike blurs, reflecting diamond-encrusted rays. Only Frenchman Robert Jacquinot and Belgian Omer Huyse follow are even close. Amongst those that give in are Philippe Thys, the only one who has been in three tours, Odile Defraye, Firmin Lambot and Léon Scieur. John Brunero, a great climber, comes off. Giuseppe Enrici also gives in, despite being first in the last lap. The carnage is unbelievable.

The ascent is practically a vertical wall. Timid creatures start to appear on the scene: fleas, hummingbirds, beetles and flies. The French call them "grimpeurs", the Spanish "trepadores", and the Italians know them as "scalatori". Bottecchia guides them, in his yellow jersey. He never accelerates, but his pace is unmatched. Soon Jacquinot and Huyse also throw in the towel. The metamorphosis is accomplished.

The yellow of his livery transforms into a fawn colour, his legs become wings. Bottecchia rises up the mountain. Twirling above the race, high and unattainable. Soaring over a shattered universe of stones and pastures, ravines and waterfalls. Like a great eagle. Alone up in the blue sky. Majestic.

Bottecchia still has 140 kilometres and four hills ahead of him: Aubisque, 1709 m - with Col des Tortes and Soulor, Tourmalet, 2115 m, Aspin, 1489 m, and Peyresourde, 1569 m.

Throwing caution to the winds, he disregards the advice of his physicians, the counsel of the most experienced climbers, those who feel that he should never go in for the kill. He grabs the bull by the horns and surges forward. Three cars follow him, lifting clouds of dust.

With his head held high, he scales the back of the mighty stone dinosaur. Brutally curving slopes arise before him. They are snaking spirals. His careful eyes explore the way ahead. He has to be flexible with the front wheel and continues to avoid holes and stones. Sharp flint daggers stick out at him.

At no point does Bottecchia seem to want the company of his opponents. The others are far behind him. Slowly plodding onwards, growing ever more distant. They soon start to disappear. The French are far behind now and only two Belgians, Omer Huyse, a new man, and Lucien Buysse, the mastiff, are pursuing him stubbornly.

Huyse is Flemish from Kortrijk, who wants to emulate his ancestors who defeated Philip IV the Beautiful in the Battle of the Golden Spurs. Lucien Buysse is the third of nine siblings: the four males are all cyclists. There have been eleven Buysse cyclists in the last two generations; racing is in their genes.

Bottecchia makes for the green meadows, and cows that peer at him with big, surprised eyes. He advances towards the peaks, the home of the gods. He pays homage with a record time climbing the Aubisque: 37'40", at 12 km / h in average. Hundreds of fans, with tired feet in heavy shoes, applaud him, their raucous cries spurring him on.

At the top, after 187 km of racing, the selection is already complete. This is where the lap times are calculated. Bottecchia has a 2'43" advantage over Huyse, who is followed by a few tens of meters by Lucien Buysse. At 6'33" pass Thys, Brunero, Cuvelier, Lambot, 6'40" Beeckman, 6'50" Alancourt, 7'25" Mottiat, 7'35" Jacquinot. Then the long chain of other cyclists, a sense of jubilation is evident in their groans.

Bottecchia crosses Col des Tortes and Soulor, then rushes forward at breakneck speed. Going downhill like this is a gamble for his life, the road is narrow, a thread hanging over the abyss. From a distance it looks like a bramble branch on a dinosaurs skin. The wheels dance their way over the rocks, the balance is precarious and then the fall suddenly explodes. Like a gunshot breaks the flight of an eagle.

A ditch makes the front tire lurch from the rim, which wasn't well secured with mastic. The bike spins off course and throws Bottecchia into the shadows. With a scream, he falls onto a rocky outcrop, wounding his legs and face and losing blood in the process. He has a gash on his yellow jersey, but gets back up, quickly checking his bike. The rear brake has loosened but he does not waste time staring at it. Boldly, he throws himself back into the race.

Upon reaching Argelès, 217 km in, he has 4' on the trio formed by Huyse, Buysse and Luxembourg Frantz. He is making a comeback. He is still 6' ahead of Brunero, 7' ahead of Lambot, Beeckman, Mottiat and Cuvelier. This is where he cleans himself up, disinfecting his cuts. He shuns the plasters and bandages, leaving his wounds to the sun, the thousand-year-old therapist. He pedals rapidly up the long, but slight slope before Barèges, at 244 km. Here he increases his 4'30" advantage over Buysse, 6' on Frantz, 9' on Huyse, 10' on Mottiat, 15' on Thys, 17' on Bellenger. Brunero, who ran over a nail that did serious damage to his tyre, has dropped by twelve to 23'. For him, the tour is essentially over.

Out in front of everyone, Bottecchia soars with his wide wings. He is incredible. The Spaniards call the bearded vulture 'quebrantahuesos', or 'broken-eggs'. And Bottecchia really broke the eggs in the basket of the Belgian and French aces that for so long held a Monopoly on the tour. He's high and far away seemingly invincible. The wounded, however, join forces. Frantz, Buysse and Huyse alternate the lead whilst giving chase. They manage to make up a few seconds time on Bottecchia. At Luz, near the foot of Tourmalet, Bottecchia only has 4'15" on them. He does not falter though. In fact, he is energised as he takes the growing hill head on.

As he climbs up Tourmalet, the trio that follows him crash into one another. The challenge becomes man against man. Bottecchia is rivalled only by teammate Buysse, who is pursuing him with determination. He has 7'45" on Frantz, 8'45" on Huyse, and 10'30" on Mottiat. On the final stretch he slows down to no more than 6-7 km / h as the fans follow him on foot; a procession of honour.

Bottecchia finishes with Tourmalet at 14.15 after 257 km of racing. He took his lead to 10'52". His will cannot be broken. He shoots downhill, as though he were parasailing. He is quick and powerful on the slight slope. He never sets foot on the ground, even when the slope becomes steep. On

Aspin, after 285 km, he increases his lead to 16', on Peyresourde, after 314 km, his is ahead by 18'27". He has annihilated his rivals.

It settles down a bit in the final. Waiting for him is the buzzing town of Luchon, with its balsamic waters, where the Romans opened the first spa, which was visited Cardinal Richelieu. The arrival of Bottecchia in his yellow jersey is glorious to behold. He wins by 15'55 "on Lucien Buysse, 30'04" on Mottiat, and 32'31" on Frantz. Brunero is seventh at 44'37 ". Thys finishes after 57'31 ", Aimo 1h 07'54", then Alavoine 1h 34'27 ". Tiberghien and Lambot, first in two tours, arrive after 1h 42'08 ". Two winners of the Tour - Defraye (1912) and Scieur (1921), second in the qualifying - are forced to retire, along with the valiant Barthélémy.

Bottecchia's performance has been sensational. Henri Desgrange, who has tasted disappointment, having conceived and followed eighteen Tours, is visibly moved. He takes a viola and plays in tribute to this prodigy, entering an unusual lyrical dimension, "Yesterday during the quiet nocturnal hours before the start, Victory had come to touch Bottecchia's young face with its finger and had said, "Tomorrow if you will think of me all day long, if you follow me well, I will flee before you, if you fix me with your young clear eyes at the summit of the painful hills, if you look for me in the corners of the street, if truly desire it, if you do all this, then in the evening I will be yours." 2

In the poetic rapture, the brown eyes of Bottecchia become "young" and "clear", but it does not matter. "His focus is remarkable," writes Desgrange, ecstatic. "You must have observed the ease of his allure, the unity of his style, the perfection of his rhythm. I've never seen him stand up on the saddle once. He started off as a beautiful racing stallion, splendid in his form, the natural winner."

Desgrange prefers Bottecchia to Brunero, who has already won two Giro d'Italia's, and adds: "I followed Brunero all day. He is a great cyclist, indisputably, but though he is great, he will bow in front of his master today. No comparison can be made between them, at least not in their current form. On top of Aubisque, Brunero was 6'30" behind Bottecchia, on Tourmalet he was 28'50" behind, and 36'50 on Aspin "then even further behind on arrival." He then compares Bottecchia to the last winner of the Tour and concludes: "Not even Henri Pélissier, who also has a good physical structure, has shown the perfection of this young Italian's style in terms of mountain assault."

This great ride will remain forever in the history of cycling. It looks good even in comparison with the great flight of Fausto Coppi in the Cuneo-Pinerolo. "On the peaks of Aubisque and Tourmalet" wrote Bruno Roghi "Ottavio Bottecchia found not only an end to a terrifying climb, the summit of an inhuman-like effort. He also found the other summit, the one known well by poets and heroes, the peak of one's spirit " (Bruno Roghi, «La Gazzetta dello Sport», 26 May 1937.)