

WIJ WAREN ALLEMAAL GODEN: DE TOUR VAN 1948

Benjo Maso

Fragmentvertaling

© Michiel Horn

A PHONE CALL FROM ROME

Wednesday, July 14th, Cannes (day of rest)

Sport and politics have nothing to do with each other. Few people still believe in this cliché today, but in 1948 it was a carefully-maintained illusion. That's why the journalists covering the Tour studiously avoided any reference to issues that were not directly related to sport. The reader who leafs through their reports of July 1948 won't have the slightest idea that, while the Tour was taking place, Israel was fighting for its independence, the western powers were trying to raise the Berlin blockade by means of an air lift, Yugoslavia's Tito (having broken with Stalin) left the Comintern, and in France the Schuman government fell. Reporters separated sport and politics so carefully that, although they did mention that the vehicles displaying advertisements had been halted at the French-Italian border, they did not add that this happened because of a strike by customs officials.

Of course, the notion that sport takes place within a small, enclosed world *was* an illusion, nothing more. Never was this more obvious than on the day of rest, July 14th. It had already been demonstrated in 1947 that social and political circumstances could directly

influence the progress of a Tour. Now it became clear that this influence could also operate in the opposite direction.

July fourteenth is a national holiday in France, and in Cannes all kinds of celebrations had been organized until late in the evening. These did not noticeably improve the mood in the Italian camp. Gino Bartali's teammates were beginning to ask themselves whether they had done the right thing in going to France. That was especially the case for Bevilacqua, who was *capitano*, a leader, in his own country but so far had barely been able to get himself noticed in France. That wouldn't matter if the Italian team won the Tour, because the glory of an Italian victory would put him in a good light too. But now that Bartali seemed to be down and out, Bevilacqua started to worry about his own reputation.

In the meantime, the handful of Italian journalists who still had some confidence in Bartali were hoping to find a plausible reason for his mediocre performance so far. Some of them theorized that it might have something to do with the visit from his wife Adriana. One reporter even claimed that she had tearfully implored her husband to be careful, with the result that he no longer dared to make aggressive descents. De Martino's statement in the *Gazzetta dello Sport* was much more suggestive: 'Bartali has been embraced by too many people. Too much love always leads to sin, and that's true not only for the fans.' This suggestion was, in fact, just a modern version of the ancient belief that contact with the feminine affects a warrior's combativeness. This is why no women were allowed in the Tour's caravan. The only exception the organizers were willing to make were the three nurses in the ambulance, although they had to accept with extreme reluctance that *L'Humanité* sent a female reporter, Marie-Louise Baron, to cover the Tour. *L'Intransigeant* had immediately taken advantage of this precedent to obtain accreditation for the actress Annabella as a special reporter for two days, but to the organizers' relief that was as far as it went. A reporter who smuggled his fiancée along in his car was sent home without mercy.

Binda attached little value to his compatriots' speculations about the reasons for Bartali's failure. According to him it was simply a question of age. For a thirty-four-year old, a Giro d'Italia and a Tour in the same season were just too much. An older man needs more time to recover. It was entirely possible that Bartali would be able to win the stage from Cannes to Briançon, but the next day he would undoubtedly feel the after-effects.

Bartali did not share Binda's pessimism at all. According to Corrieri, the setback of the Turini did not cause him a moment's doubt. He *was* still extraordinarily angry with himself. His mood didn't improve until after his morning massage, when his trainer Colombo told him that his muscles were in optimum condition for the first time since the start of the Tour. He felt even better after receiving two telegrams. The first was from Monsignor Montini – later Pope Paul VI – who granted him a special blessing in the name of the Holy Father. The second was from the Italian Prime Minister, Alcide de Gasperi, who wished him success in the Alps. No doubt Bartali's mood would have improved further if he had known how the French national team were reacting to his defeat the day before.

With his victory in the last stage, Bobet naturally believed that he had proved he was the undisputed leader. Tisseire, Robic and Vietto were twenty to thirty minutes behind and seemed to have no chance. Perhaps he could have convinced everybody if he had put his foot down, so to speak, and asserted himself, but he was still too young and inexperienced for that. During team discussions he usually said little or nothing. His accomplishments should have been enough to convince his teammates, but they continued to underestimate him. They were still

waiting for his collapse which thereby, of course, they only helped to bring closer. Obviously Archambaud should have intervened in his role as team captain, but the small amount of authority he had enjoyed at the outset had completely vanished by this time. The result was that Bartali's defeat, far from strengthening Bobet's position on the French team, actually weakened it. First of all, his popularity with his teammates had certainly not grown. The whole story of the boil, which had won him so much public sympathy, was regarded with some scepticism. 'I don't doubt he was in pain,' Vietto said, for example, 'but we're all in pain. The difference is that we don't cry about it.' Much more important was that each man suddenly believed in his own chances again. Now that the unassailable Bartali had been beaten, the road ahead seemed to open up for everybody once more. Take Robic, for example. He had always been convinced that he would win the Tour, but now he was sure of it. In the stage that ended in Cannes he had gained on Bartali for the first time. The twenty-seven minutes that still separated him from Bobet and Lambrecht were, in his opinion, easily overcome. Bobet's collapse could not be far off, and Lambrecht was no climber. Moreover, at the foot of the Pyrenees in 1947 he had been just as far behind, and this time he had not one but two mountain stages to set matters straight. While Bobet stayed in his room all day, Robic carried on like a future winner. He gave interviews, signed autographs, went donkey-riding on the beach, took a few journalists along to a friend's farm and was photographed milking a goat, and visited a sanatorium where he told the patients about the Tour and his expectations for the stages to come.

Teisseire, too, believed he was far from out of it. In any event he wanted to ride his own race and didn't have the slightest intention of sacrificing himself for Bobet's sake. René Vietto visited an acupuncturist for treatment of his painful knee and talked about dropping out, but he did that almost every day. Bartali's failure had given him new hope as well. With a brilliantly victorious stage he could retrieve his Tour in one fell stroke. Just like Bartali, he regarded the Izoard as *his* mountain. True, he had lost the Tour there in 1939, but in the Monaco-Paris race of 1946 he had been the first to reach the top. The day before, Vietto had urged Apo Lazaridès to give Bobet all possible support, but in the stage to Briançon he reserved his protégé's help for himself. That meant, in fact, that Bobet could count only on Paul Giguët, who would be of little use to him in the mountains.

The Belgians had total faith in the prospects of Impanis. To overcome the beginnings of a head cold he stayed in his hotel room all day, but he assured the journalists that otherwise he felt in tip-top shape. The next day Ockers would not budge from his side for even a minute, so as to be able to help him in case of misfortune. The same thing went for Van Dijk, at least if he were able to keep up. The other Belgians had no instructions other than to finish within the time limit. Karel van Wijnendaele assumed they would drop too far behind on the ascents to be able to give much support to their leader. There was full agreement on this score. Briek Schotte, for example, who had lost a lot of time on the Turini and had dropped to eighteenth place, said that he would give everything to finish among the top ten but unfortunately was too weak a climber.

While the racers, in the warm weather of Cannes, weighed their chances for the coming days, an event took place in a still warmer Rome that would give the further course of the Tour a very special meaning. Palmiro Togliatti, the leader of the Communist Party, left a session of Parliament at 11:35 a.m. with Nilde Iotti, officially just his secretary but in reality also his mistress. Their purpose was to eat an ice-cream cone in a nearby bar. They walked down the steps at the rear of the Montecitorio, the Parliament Building. Togliatti halted for a moment to loosen his necktie. At that moment one Antonio Pallante, a twenty-four-year old law student,

approached him, pulled out a revolver and shot him in the chest three times. Nilde Iotti threw herself on her lover's body and screamed: 'Murderer, murderer!' The man fired a fourth shot but missed. Moments later he allowed two policemen to overpower him without offering resistance. A parliamentary messenger came outside to see what was the matter, ran back in and shouted: 'Togliatti has been shot!' Seconds later the news reached the Chamber.

Togliatti was quickly taken to a hospital, and an hour-and-a-half later, while the surgeons were getting ready to operate on him, the news of the assassination attempt was broadcast over the radio. Everywhere in Italy people spontaneously stopped working. Farmers and labourers demonstrated in city squares, factories were occupied, the offices of right-wing parties were pelted with rocks, and the first riots broke out.

1

Togliatti had not lost consciousness and had urged the faithful 'not to do anything stupid and to stay calm.' A quarter after one, Togliatti was put under anesthesia, and the surgeons began the task of removing the bullets. Reporters, members of the Communist parliamentary group and Prime Minister De Gasperi gathered in the hospital and waited for news. Hundreds of thousands of Italians were glued to the radio. If Togliatti were to die of his wounds, nobody could predict what might await the country. Nothing was impossible, not even revolution or a civil war. After all, Italy had already been in a condition of acute social and political tension for months.

Until May, 1947, the Communists had been part of the government and had generally pursued a very moderate course. But from the moment they went into opposition they became steadily more radical. International developments played a major role in this. The Christian Democrats were great champions of the Marshall Plan and the American economic aid associated with it. The Communists were fiercely opposed to it because they realized full well that accepting the Plan would bring Italy into the US sphere of influence. After the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia, warmly welcomed by Togliatti and sharply rejected by the Christian Democrats, the parties' hostility to each other became even stronger. The parliamentary elections of April 1948 were seen as being decisively important for Italy's future fate. The Communists and the larger part of the Socialist Party formed a Popular Front that had a real chance of securing an absolute majority. The Christian Democrats could depend on the active support of the Catholic Church, which threatened leftist voters with hell and damnation. Both camps mobilized every ounce of strength available to them. Even popular sports heroes were pulled into the election fight. The Christian Democrats offered Binda, Bartali and Coppi positions on the electoral list high enough to make their election possible. Coppi got the same offer from the Popular Front. Binda was the only one to accept but did not win a seat. Bartali and Coppi limited themselves to a public call to vote 'patriotically,' that is, non-Communist.

The election turned out to be a terrible disappointment for the Popular Front. It received no more than 30 per cent of the vote, while the Christian Democrats, with 47 per cent, secured an absolute majority in Parliament. The Communists refused to accept their defeat meekly and accused their opponents of intimidation and large-scale fraud. Within the parliamentary chamber, extremely unpleasant exchanges took place between Prime Minister De Gasperi and Togliatti, who once went so far as to threaten an armed uprising.

In view of the events of the preceding months, it was no wonder that many Communists saw the attempt on Togliatti's life as offering an occasion to revenge themselves. Others, in contrast, feared that the right-wing parties were looking for a great day of reckoning, in emulation of Mussolini who had ordered the assassination of the Communist leader Matteotti in 1924. In the event, when De Gasperi tried to make a government statement in the Chamber the next day, he was constantly interrupted by left-wing deputies who shouted that he was a murderer with blood on his hands.

To the great relief of many people, the surgeons issued a statement at 2:50 p.m. that the operation had been a success. Togliatti's condition was still critical, but the immediate threat to his life seemed to have receded. That did not prevent disturbances from spreading over the entire country. In many places mobs disarmed police constables, while telephone exchanges, radio stations and armouries were occupied. In some cities the Communists even assumed power and installed interim administrations. After the surgeons' bulletin, De Gasperi returned from the hospital and immediately called an emergency session of the cabinet. Especially the Minister for Internal Affairs argued for tough measures. The leadership of the Communist Party had also gathered. They were greatly outraged, but the majority nevertheless shrank from the use of force, being of the opinion that any armed insurrection has to be carefully prepared and must be based on rational considerations and not on emotion. Everyone did agree that a general strike should be called for the next day.

Many Italians in Cannes had listened to the French noontime news, and when Bartali came down from his room for lunch he found a group of worried Italian journalists in the hotel lobby. Most had received instructions to return to Italy at once and had come to say goodbye. At first Bartali thought they wanted to leave because they had lost confidence in him. His face turned red and he immediately announced that they could not expect an interview if he were to win the Tour. They calmed him down and told him what had happened in Italy.

Bartali found the news of the assassination attempt deeply worrying. Florence was a 'red' city and if an armed encounter were to take place, his own family might be right in the line of fire. He asked himself whether he, too, would not be well-advised to return home. The journalists counselled him to wait for the time being and to take no precipitate action. He tried to phone his wife, but could not get through to Florence.

The tension was broken somewhat by a visit from Bartolo Paschetto, one of the leaders of the Catholic Action movement. He brought along an enormous cake decorated with icing in the colours of the Italian flag. Bartali suggested to his teammates that they go to the beach, find some shade there, and eat the cake. After all, it made little sense to stay in the hotel and wait for news from Italy. Of course, Bartali knew that a cyclist's stomach was easily upset and it was not very smart to eat a large piece of pastry the day before a mountain stage. The bottle of vermouth and the pack of cigarettes that also went along were at first sight even less sensible, but there *was* an emergency in Italy, after all.

Bartali and his teammates returned to the hotel at six. Soon afterwards he heard a page calling his name: a phone call from Italy. First he thought his wife had succeeded in getting through, but to his amazement his caller turned out to be Prime Minister De Gasperi. Bartali had got to know him in Catholic Action in 1935, and in the course of time they had become good friends. De Gasperi asked him how he was and whether he thought he could win the Tour. Bartali answered that the Tour had another week-and-a-half to go and that anything could happen. The Prime Minister said that of course he realized that, but asked once again how good

the prospects for a final victory were. It was important for the country, he added. Bartali could do no more than promise to do his utmost. He did assure De Gasperi that he was ninety percent sure he would win the next day's stage. The Prime Minister expressed his best wishes and ended the conversation.

The most striking thing about this incident is not that De Gasperi believed a Tour victory could contribute to calming popular emotion. The same thought probably crossed a lot of Italian minds at that moment. Much more remarkable is that at the height of the crisis he took the trouble of phoning Bartali. At this point the first deaths had already occurred and the situation seemed to be deteriorating by the minute. That the Prime Minister interrupted the deliberations with his cabinet to spur Bartali on is the clearest illustration of the enormous importance accorded to the sport of cycling in Italy at that time.

Just as remarkable is that De Gasperi was evidently convinced that he could encourage Bartali by pointing out the importance of the remaining stages for the national interest. As Jacques Goddet wrote, Bartali was at a critical point in his career. If he were beaten in the Alps, he would have to acquiesce in the supremacy of Fausto Coppi. Bartali himself had already announced that, in the event of a defeat, he would definitely withdraw from the sport, even though he did promise to complete the Tour in any case, if only out of respect for his colleagues and the organizers. As though the burden resting on Bartali's shoulders was not big enough, De Gasperi also placed the fate of Italy in his hands. Some people succumb under great pressure and others are stimulated by it. During his long political career De Gasperi never took unnecessary risks, and he must have known what he was doing. After all, he had known Bartali for years.

UNBELIEVABLE NEWS FROM FRANCE

Thursday, July 15th, Cannes–Briançon (274 km)

Henri Desgrange believed that his Tour could only be dramatic when superhuman performances were achieved. Until the end of the 1920s, stages of more than three hundred kilometres were no exception, and in order to allow the finish to take place before nightfall, the start signal was often given well before daybreak. A stage like Cannes–Briançon would not have been out of place in that heroic age. Some 274 kilometres had to be covered, complete with three cols, passes, higher than 2000 metres. Before the racers reached the first of these, they would already have several ascents behind them. Today these would undoubtedly be included in the mountains classification, but in 1948 they were not held to be sufficiently challenging. All the same, they made the course particularly hard. To be able to get everyone in before the end of the afternoon, the start was scheduled for six in the morning. That meant the racers had to get out of bed at four.

Bartali had already been fined several times because he had not checked in on time, but on this occasion he was one of the first to show up. Aside from the faithful *Corrieri*, only four of his fans accompanied him. It was a striking contrast with his triumphal progress to the start line in San Remo, when half the town had escorted him. This had something to do with the time of departure, of course, but that was not the sole reason. In spite of the early hour, a large crowd had gathered at the check-in point. A conspicuously large number of spectators were in evening

dress. These were people who had been celebrating all night and who, armed with bottles of champagne, had come to view the departure of the racers. Among them were the film crew of *Madame et ses peaux-rouges (The Lady and her Redskins)*, starring Arletty, which was being filmed in Cannes at the time.

Bartali was in a conspicuously good mood. At last he would see the Izoard again, where he had won his first Tour ten years earlier. This pass had a mystical significance for him and, as Goddet wrote with some exaggeration, he believed in it as strongly as he believed in God. Bartali had even said to Dante Gianello that if he could just hear 'Gino Bartali, first to reach the Izoard' once more, he wouldn't even mind losing the Tour.

Robic was also in an excellent mood. For him, too, this was the stage he had looked forward to since the start of the Tour. 'Those three passes today are my mascots,' he said. 'I can't lose.' He was afraid only of cold weather, but Apo Lazaridès, who as a resident of Cannes could pass himself off as an expert, assured him that he could tell from the way the crickets were chirping that it was going to be a gorgeous day. On the coast, perhaps, but the racers had to go far inland.

Bobet was clearly tense, but he felt good and was full of confidence. He was willing to accept that Robic would ride for himself, but counted on the rest of the team to assist him.

Most of the journalists' attention did not, in fact, focus on the day's three leading actors but on Maurice Chevalier, star of the music halls and a number of Hollywood films. He had never in his life seen a bicycle race, but *France Presse* was paying him 100,000 francs for his impressions during the next two days.

After some slight delay the start signal was given, and at 6:15 the seventy surviving racers got underway. Brambilla, who was suffering from boils and had almost come in too late in the previous stage, soon lost contact with the others and got off his bike. On the outskirts of Cannes the road began to climb and the pack rode so slowly that Tony Bevilacqua took advantage of the situation to launch an escape. That was part of the strategy the Italian team had plotted out. Bevilacqua was no climber, but if he got enough of a lead he would perhaps be able to give Bartali valuable support during the twenty kilometres of flat road between the first two passes, the Allos and the Vars. How nervous Bobet was became apparent when he personally parried Bevilacqua's attack. Impanis, Lambrecht, Brulé, Teisseire, Lazaridès, Schotte and a few others reacted at once. Bartali calmly remained in the pack, as did Robic, who did not lose sight of him for even a moment. In the meantime Vietto had dropped behind, and Lazaridès slowed down to help his mentor return to the pack. Vietto explained later that his slump had been purely mental. It pained him to leave his home town of Cannes and he would have been glad to turn back.

While this was happening, the sky was clouding over and a ice-cold wind began to blow. When the first escape attempt had been reeled in, nobody any longer felt like undertaking a new adventure. The racers huddled together and the pack remained solid until the climb up the Col d'Allos (2250 m). As soon as the road began to ascend, Vietto, who seemed to have recovered fully, went to the front of the pack and maintained a stiff tempo. The pack had already been strung out a good deal when Teisseira attacked. He got company from Impanis, Brulé, Lazaridès, Ockers, and Neri. It looked as if the French Nationals were following a well-considered plan, but in fact it was pure improvisation. Robic stayed on Bartali's wheel and waited until his rival had to backpedal in order to change gears and so was helpless for a moment. As soon as this happened, Robic broke away with full power and quickly caught up

with the escaping group. At once he launched a second breakaway and reached the top with a lead of more than twenty seconds. Bartali went by in seventh place, more than a minute behind. Bobet followed a few seconds later.

During the first kilometres of the descent the road surface was in dreadful condition. It had not yet been asphalted, and stones lay scattered all over. Moreover, because it had rained recently there was a layer of mud. Most drivers did not notice how slippery it was until they tried to brake in the curves and found their cars slipping sideways. Indeed, the automobile of the newspaper *L'Intransigeant* went into a ravine. The four occupants survived the crash, but two of them were seriously injured. To keep from falling and avoid the stones, most of the racers rode down at a walking pace. All the same, there were lots of tumbles and flat tires. Bobet was one of the victims and asked Lazaridès to stop. In vain. Apo was seconded to Vietto and rode on. The wearer of the yellow jersey lost minimal time only because Giguet gave him a wheel and because Lazaridès *was* willing to slow down to wait for him.

Robic was an excellent downhill racer and took lots of risks. The finish was still 140 kilometres away, but his solo ride in the Pyrenees the year before had been even longer. French journalists danced enthusiastically on the running boards of cars, screaming encouragement and shouting that his lead kept growing. His pursuers had got together, but there was nothing like an organized pursuit. At the foot of the Vars they were nearly two minutes behind. Halfway up, a few dozen seconds had been added to this.

When the stretch of asphalt road ended, the pursuers' tempo slowed at once. It had begun to rain hard, and the temperature was just above freezing. André Costes, a reporter for *France Soir*, noted that, for the first time since the Tour had left Paris, Bartali wasn't making a sour face, but that 'his purple lips, dripping with mud, were actually curling.' And as Coppi said once, when Bartali was smiling he was always at his most dangerous.

While the other racers were looking for a lower gear, Bartali actually shifted to a higher gear, came off his seat, sprinted two hundred metres and looked back. He sat down again, extended his knee sideways, coasted for a moment, rode on in a steady tempo for a while, stood on his pedals again and began sprinting once more. It was a style no other racer has ever wanted to or been able to emulate, but it was extraordinarily effective. When Bartali was in condition he could maintain this kind of cycling for kilometres on end and open up a big gap on the other racers.

Teisseire was the only one who tried to respond to the Italian's attack, but because of the mud his derailleur began to jam, and he soon had to cease his efforts. It did not take long before Bartali had Robic in his sights. He could easily have caught the Frenchman, but not for a moment did he think of doing that. The ascent up the Izoard was still over forty kilometres off and if he could not shake off Robic the latter would undoubtedly stay on his wheel that entire distance. Therefore Bartali applied his usual tactic: first exhaust his opponent and then strike.

When Robic spotted Bartali approaching on the hairpin turn below he immediately stood on his pedals and tried to increase the lead over his pursuer. Bartali calmly let him do as he pleased and waited for a bit before sneaking closer again. Robic began sprinting for a second time and Bartali gave him hope by failing to respond at once; then he began closing the gap once more. This happened again. And yet again. 'Devilishly clever,' Félix Léviton wrote in the *Parisien Libéré*. It was in exactly this way that Bartali had totally crushed the morale of Firmin Trueba in the 1946 Tour of Switzerland. The effect this time was just as crushing.

Dead tired from his long solo ride and the constant changes in tempo, and chilled by the icy rain, Robic reached the top of the Vars thirty seconds before Bartali. Teisseire was almost two minutes behind. He was followed by Schotte, who always rode well in cold weather, Vietto, Lazaridès and Camellini. Lambrecht and Bobet, who had been abandoned by his teammates, were already three-and-a-half minutes in arrears.

Just as on the Allos, the first kilometres of the descent were covered with a thick layer of mud, and Robic no longer had the strength to take risks. Even on the somewhat less steep sections, where Bartali pedaled, Robic did not move his legs. For a while Bartali hung back around fifty to sixty metres behind his opponent, but when it became evident that the latter was at the end of his resources he sprinted past him on a long straightaway. Bartali writes in his memoirs that Robic looked at him in stunned disbelief. At that moment it must have dawned on the Frenchman that he was not going to win the Tour.

For Bartali, the 3,000 kilometres since the start in Paris had been nothing but a preparation for this moment. At last he could go full speed ahead. During the descent there was no sign of the caution he had shown on the Turini two days earlier. He zipped down with so much daring and 'acrobatic virtuosity' that former Tour-winner André Leducq, who tried to keep pace with Bartali in his car but soon lost sight of him, got goosebumps, to use Leducq's own words. By the time he reached the valley he had a minute's lead on Robic. Camellini followed three-and-a-half minutes later. Bobet, who had taken just as many chances in the descent as Bartali, showed up fifteen seconds later, just ahead of Vietto and Lambrecht. Schotte, Teisseire and Lazaridès, who had each had to deal with mishaps, were much farther back. Impanis, who had suffered two flat tires and whose fingers were so cold that he could hardly change his tires, was already nearly nine minutes behind, in spite of the help he was getting from Ockers.

Bartali was now completely unleashed and sped through Guillestre at such high speed that he failed to pick up his lunch bag at the provisions station. It would have been better if he had stopped for a moment. After all, his lead on Bobet, Vietto, Camellini and Lambrecht, who had passed the psychologically completely broken Robic, had stretched to five-and-a-half minutes. But at that moment Bartali was probably so full of adrenaline that every second seemed vitally important to him. Italian journalists offered him something to eat, but the only thing they had with them were sandwiches with sausage, which would be too heavy in the stomach during a climb. The lack of calories might have been fatal if a guardian angel had not shown up: a spectator who gave Bartali three bananas. According to Corrieri it was a priest, but he isn't altogether sure. In any case he must have been a generous soul, because in 1948 bananas were far from cheap. A kilo cost 127 francs, the price of four litres of gas or three weeks' worth of issues of *L'Equipe*.

A much bigger drama was taking place behind Bartali's back. Just outside Guillestre, Bobet's pedal shaft broke. Archambaud was driving just behind him and stopped at once. The mechanic got the spare bicycle off the roof of the car and because it was much too small he immediately began to adjust the seat and handlebars. Meanwhile Archambaud himself put tires on the wheels, which in line with regulations were 'bare'. When Bobet realized he was going to lose a lot of time he broke out weeping and complained about his fate to the reporters who had stopped. 'There's no justice,' he sobbed.

Bobet regarded the incident as a blow from blind fate, but it wasn't that simple. In fact, with the mountain stage in mind, he had wanted to make his bicycle as light as possible. One of the alterations he had made was to replace the solid pedal shaft with a hollow one. It weighed a

bit less, of course, but it was also less strong. In order to save himself a few ounces, Bobet had risked being hit more easily by a breakdown. In other words, he had gambled and lost. It was bad luck, of course, but altogether unforeseeable it was not.

Estimates of the time it took to prepare Bobet's spare bike diverge strongly. According to Italian journalists it was at most four minutes, while some of their French colleagues claimed that it was at least twice that long. Very likely it was five minutes and five seconds. That, at least, was the time recorded by Jean Lambertie of the *Franc-Tireur*. In view of the complicated operations the mechanic had to perform, it wasn't all that bad. The tragic part was only that it could all have been much simpler. Bobet was the lead racer, he wore the yellow jersey and it would of course have made excellent sense if the team captain's car had been carrying a bicycle in his size. It was no wonder, then, that Archambaud later received heavy criticism from all sides. He defended himself with the argument that, after all, the racers on his team varied considerably in height. Because unfortunately he was permitted to carry only one bicycle, it had to be one that could be adjusted both to Robic's 1.61 metres as well as the 1.80 metres of Bobet and Teisseire. The journalists were flabbergasted. Was it really possible that Archambaud did not know that this regulation had been changed in the course of the Tour? Had he not seen that the other team captains all carried two bicycles on the roof of their cars? Up to that moment the French team chief could only be charged with lack of authority. Now it became clear that he was incompetent as well.

At about the time that a weeping Bobet got back on his bicycle, Bartali had already progressed well into the Combe du Queyras, the valley that leads to the base of the Izoard. The climb up this pass was a lot harder in 1948 than it is today. The last few kilometres had not yet been paved and when it rained they were coated with a layer of mud. Some parts sloped up at more than 15 degrees, while the curves were much sharper and more irregular than today. When the 1948 Tour reached this point, moreover, a major storm had blown up in which hail and wet snow alternated.

Guido Righi, the editor-in-chief of the *Corriere dello Sport*, had a few days earlier written with regret that the Tour's coverage had lost its epic quality. That was not at all strange. Desgrange's throbbing metaphors seemed inappropriate in the light of the horrors of the Second World War, and they had yielded to more businesslike commentary and statistics. But something of the baroque prose of the 1930s re-emerged in the descriptions of the extraordinary conditions under which the climb up the Izoard took place. Reporters vied with each other in the search for suitable comparisons, ranging from 'a decor worthy of the third act of Verdi's *Rigoletto*' to 'an apocalyptic vision' to 'Dante's depiction of hell as illustrated by Gustave Doré'. Bartali would later hit the same note. He wrote in his memoirs that he felt himself grow in size, that it was as if the elements were giving expression to the drama of the moment. On the almost imperceptible rise to the base of the Izoard he gained one minute after another. During the actual ascent, on the other hand, his tempo dropped. Until the bananas had been digested he got increasingly hungry. Nevertheless, with grim determination he forged ahead through the mud to the top, a man with a mission. In spite of the heavy weather, many hundreds of spectators had come up the mountain, some by car but most by bicycle.

Right to the top of the Izoard, Bartali was one of the few racers who did not have to cope with mechanical difficulties. That was not altogether a coincidence. For this particular stage he had asked the mechanics to mount heavy-duty tires. But he had his share of bad luck as well. First his chain came off as he was changing gears, and then he got a flat tire. Binda's car

had not been able to keep up with him in the descent, and he lost valuable time because his fingers were so cold and stiff that he could not make his own repairs. Around a minute passed before the mechanics turned up with a spare wheel, but the rim was so wet from the rain that the glue did not stick properly. Bartali therefore descended just as carefully as he had from the Turini two days earlier. His lead was so large that he simply did not need to take chances.

When Bartali reached the finish line on the Champs de Mars in Briançon, around 4:25 p.m., the music that rather inappropriately sounded from the loudspeakers at that moment was Tosca's aria 'Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore' (I have lived for art, I have lived for love). Bartali was so hungry and chilled that he did not even raise his hand in acknowledgement of the applause. Binda immediately wrapped him in a raincoat and led him to the team-captain's car. The young woman whose job it was to present the stage winner with a bouquet of flowers approached him bashfully, but he handed the flowers right back. 'Just take them to a church,' Bartali said before getting in the automobile.

Bartali was already on his way to his hotel room when, to everybody's surprise, Briek Schotte crossed the line in second place. Now that stamina, resistance and toughness weighed more heavily than natural talent, Schotte did not need to give way to anyone, not even in the mountains. For a long time he had hesitated, wondering whether he shouldn't wait for Impanis, but once Van Wijnendaele gave him the order to go full steam ahead, he launched a sensational pursuit. During the last twelve kilometres up the Izoard he lost little more than two minutes to Bartali. At the top he fell because his front wheel got stuck in the mud, but, thanks to a very fast descent, even before reaching the outskirts of Briançon he was able to make up the time lost during the climb.

The next racers to finish were Camellini and Vietto, both 34 years old and much better able to cope with adverse conditions than most of the younger racers. Lucien Teisseire, who had climbed even faster than Schotte, came in fifth. He was followed by De Gribaldy and Klabinisky. Guy Lapébie, smiling broadly, came in eighth. True, he complained that the brand-new racing shorts he had bought in Paris for 1500 francs kept slipping down, but he naturally realized very clearly that he had, in fact, already reached his goal. No one could ever again accuse him of lacking toughness.

After Kirchen and Pasquini had crossed the finish, many spectators began looking at their watches in disquiet. Bartali was 21 minutes and 28 seconds behind in the general classification. By virtue of his stage victory and of being the first to reach the top of the Vars and Izoard he had received bonus totalling two minutes and fifteen seconds. This meant that Bobet could not lose more than 19 minutes and 13 seconds if he wanted to retain the yellow jersey. A relieved applause broke out when Bobet showed up in the company of Paul Neri and Roger Lambrecht, rather more than eighteen minutes behind Bartali. Lambrecht, who had enjoyed a six-minute lead on Bobet halfway down the Izoard and seemed set to assume the yellow jersey, had fallen hard and was crying with pain and disappointment. Bobet was scarcely in better shape. His face was grey with exhaustion, and he had to be propped up to keep him from collapsing. Although he would have been wise to copy Bartali and go straight to his hotel, he nevertheless allowed himself to be persuaded to ride a victory lap.

Bobet was not the only racer to arrive exhausted. Twenty-four minutes behind Bartali, Raymond Impanis crossed the finish line, quite numb with cold. 'It's a dog's life,' he stammered, shaking his head. Robic arrived moments later. He had been sobbing with misery as he climbed the Izoard, and just before reaching the top he had fallen off his bike, thoroughly

fatigued. Spectators had helped him back into the saddle, and without the support of Lazaridès he probably would not have succeeded in reaching Briançon. André Brulé, who had passed him during the descent and had seen that the cold was turning his friend blue, stood waiting for him with a warm drink. It didn't help much. Robic slung his arms around a worried-looking Lazaridès and begged him not to abandon him. "He was like a broken toy," said a Belgian journalist.

Seven minutes behind Robic, Ronconi arrived, another favorite who had been definitively beaten. His helpers Seghezzi and Lambertini had pushed him up the Izoard, but he was so exhausted that during the descent he had fallen ten minutes behind his teammates.

Ronconi was far from being the last to reach Briançon. Géminiani, who had got no fewer than five flat tires, was only halfway up the Izoard when he heard from a spectator that Bartali had reached the finish. He still had an hour's cycling ahead of him. All the same, during the last few kilometres of the climb he passed many racers who were no longer capable of staying in the saddle and were pushing their bikes through the mud. They were pretty well on their own. The 'bus' system, whereby a number of racers stick together with the sole purpose of saving their strength as much as possible, yet finishing before the deadline, did not yet exist in 1948. Every racer operated on the principle that he had to perform as best he could.

The last to enter Briançon, almost two hours behind Gino Bartali, was Jacques Pras, the victor of the stage that ended in La Rochelle. Seven racers had given up along the way, so that only 63 were left.

One of the first things Bartali asked when he reached the hotel was how things were going in Italy. The journalists weren't able to tell him much. The storm had brought the telephone lines down, and hours had passed since they had heard anything. The only thing they knew was that renewed disturbances had broken out that morning. In some cities the police and the army had found it necessary to intervene. Apart from demonstrations and public meetings everywhere, though, things were quiet in much of the country, Florence included. Economic life had ground to a halt. Only grocery stores had obtained permission to stay open until noon. From noon onwards everything was closed. Factories and offices were shut down, public transportation had stopped running, travelers were stranded in railway stations, most telephones were out of commission, newspapers were not being published, and here and there electricity had been cut off. Radio was the only thing that still worked. Because nobody had thought it necessary to send a radio reporter to France to arrange for direct broadcasts, virtually nothing was known in Italy about the Tour when Bartali crossed the finish line in Briançon. Only ham radio operators who managed to receive French stations or the long-wave transmission by Radio Luxembourg knew what was going on. At 6:00 p.m., some 35 minutes after Bartali's arrival in Briançon (Italy was on Summer Time, whereas France was on Standard Time), the *radiogiornale* would be broadcast in Italy. As in every country, the radio journal began with headlines announcing the most important domestic and foreign news items, followed by more detailed stories and then less important news. Sport came only at the end. On this occasion the news editor decided to depart from the usual sequence just this once. He knew, of course, that hundreds of thousands of Italians would be listening tensely to the latest information about the crisis that had the country in its grip. But just like De Gasperi he was convinced that favourable news from the Tour would have a calming effect. He chose to open the newscast with that story:

Sports fans, good evening. Tremendous, fantastic, incredible news from France! A historic achievement by Gino Bartali! Among the snowy peaks of the Alps he completely

recovered his enormous abilities as a pure climber and put a huge distance between himself and his opponents. The Frenchman Robic, who attempted an escape at the start of this difficult mountain stage, suffered a terrible collapse and reached the finish line almost half an hour behind. His compatriot Bobet, who was barely able to retain the yellow jersey, lost twenty minutes to Bartali. Our champion, dismissed just a bit too hastily by segments of the press as old and worn out, actually turned out to be in brilliant form, every bit as strong and determined as he was ten years ago when he first won the Tour. ... But now for the latest on Togliatti. His condition improved noticeably today and his physicians are of the opinion that he can be released from hospital no later than Monday.

...

The effect exceeded all expectations. Thousands of people had gathered in Milan's Piazza Duomo for a protest meeting. From the bars, where people were listening to the radio, the news about Bartali spread like wildfire to the crowd outside, and cheers were heard everywhere. Communists, Christian Democrats, and police officers fell into each others' arms. The same thing happened in many other cities.

In Rome's Montecitorio, an emergency session of Parliament was taking place in which emotions ran so high that members quite literally came to blows. Moments after six o'clock, one parliamentarian, the Honourable Tenengo, came rushing in and screamed: 'Bartali has won! He's almost got the yellow jersey!' Here, too, all differences were forgotten for a moment. Political opponents congratulated each other, and from left and right the shouts resounded: 'Viva l'Italia!'

In Fatebenefratelli Hospital Togliatti was chatting with his son Aldo when he suddenly heard noises out in the corridor. He asked him to check out what was happening. Aldo returned in a few moments: 'Bartali's won the first stage in the Alps. He's only a minute behind Bobet.' Togliatti, who was a great sports fan, began to beam.

Pope Pius XII, 'Papa Pacelli', made such a spiritual impression that Bartali, for one, held him to be the most beautiful man on earth. But that did not alter the fact that he was also Italian and capable of being as chauvinistic as the next person. In 1950 he would be scandalized that the Italian teams did not combine to prevent a foreigner from winning the Giro. It was therefore no surprise that he shared in the general enthusiasm when he heard the news from France. According to a spokesman 'the Holy Father had repeatedly asked for news about the Tour and had expressed his great satisfaction with the startling achievements of Bartali.'

The effects of Bartali's victory were so overpowering that to this day many Italians are convinced that he saved Italy from a revolution. That is very probably a great exaggeration. Rather, the reactions to Bartali's victory supply us with evidence that an uprising would have had no chance of success. The reports about the Tour were able for a moment to overshadow everything else at the height of the crisis only because in fact there was little real revolutionary sentiment. In the course of the day after the assassination attempt most of the Communist leadership had come to that view and were increasingly less inclined to rush into a dubious adventure. What the enthusiasm about Bartali's achievements also made clear was that Italy was more united than was apparent at first sight.

In 1948 Italy was a very divided country. In no other Western European country were the contradistinctions so sharp and the social differences so great. Nowhere else was the Church so powerful, the Communist Party so large, and the geographic contrast between the industrialized, modern north and the agrarian, backward south so striking. These contrasts were

so strong that they left no aspect of society untouched. They received their most popular literary form in Guareschi's short stories about Don Camillo, the first collection of which appeared two months before the start of the Tour. The dualism was perceptible in every area of society, even in art and culture. Nor could bicycle racing escape from it. On the contrary, Coppi and Bartali were seen as clear-cut representatives of the distinctions that dominated the country in the early post-war years. In this way Bartali, a Tuscan, stood for tradition and the Church. Coppi, an introverted northerner who was five years younger, personified modernism. In line with the principles of *dualismo* and because his rival was Christian Democrat, Coppi could, in the eyes of most Italians, only be Communist or Socialist. That the opposite was in fact true could do nothing to alter this perception.

The two champions were such recognizable symbols of the contrasts in post-war Italy that the author Curzio Malaparte was able to claim in a famous essay that the rivalry between the two men divided the country in such a way that 'no Italian could escape taking sides'. The statement was so striking that it has been quoted hundreds of times. And yet it is incorrect. The antagonism between Bartali and Coppi was actually far from absolute. On the one hand they were fierce rivals, but on the other hand they were just as tightly bound to each other as Don Camillo and Peppone, who moved heaven and earth in order not to lose each other. For the public, too, they were Italians first and opponents only second. It is no wonder that they were never as popular as when in 1949 they jointly beat the foreign competition. And they were never as reviled as when during the 1948 world championships they permitted their rivalry to outweigh the 'national honour'. Nor is it coincidence that the most-publicized photo of the two racers does not show them in conflict with each other but instead shows one assisting the other and giving him a drink.

All this clearly shows that Malaparte was wrong. The rivalry between Coppi and Bartali did not divide the country. On the contrary: it strengthened its unity. The duels between the two champions stimulated social and political opponents to hold conversations in which their differences were not absent but could be expressed in sublimated form. At the same time, both parties were able to experience the national pride in Italian cycling supremacy that the two rivals had jointly built up. When Bartali won the stage to Briançon, it was not just Christian Democrats and traditionalists who screamed themselves hoarse, but all Italians. If Bartali's victory in the first Alpine stage did in fact contribute to the prevention of a civil war, it was because it underlined once again that national sentiment was strong enough to rise above all divisions. As Raimono Manzini wrote in the July 25, 1948 issue of *L'Avvenire*, Bartali represented 'the one and only happy event that finally united Italy during one of the most despair-filled periods in the history of the fatherland'.