Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini were a well-known literary duo in Italy for several decades until Lucentini's death in 2002. For about forty years they co-wrote newspaper and magazine articles, literary essays, edited numerous anthologies and published six ground-breaking and best-selling mystery novels. Their first novel, *The Sunday Woman*, was made into a film in 1975 starring Marcello Mastroianni, Jacqueline Bisset and Jean-Louis Trintignant. *Runaway Horses* and *The Lover of No Fixed Abode* were translated by Gregory Dowling and first published in English by Bitter Lemon Press.

RUNAWAY HORSES

Carlo Fruttero
and
Franco Lucentini

Translated by
Gregory Dowling

BITTER LEMON PRESS
LONDON

BITTER LEMON PRESS

First published in the United Kingdom in 2025 by
Bitter Lemon Press, 47 Wilmington Square, London WC1X OET
www.bitterlemonpress.com

First published in Italian in 1983 as *Il palio delle contrade morte* by
Arnoldo Mondadori Editore S.p.A., Milano
© 1983 Arnoldo Mondadori Editore S.p.A., Milano
© 2019 Mondadori Libri S.p.A., Milano
English translation © 2025 Gregory Dowling

This Work has been translated with the contribution of Centro per
il libro e la lettura del Ministero della Cultura Italiano.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any
form or by any means without written permission of the publisher.

The moral rights of the author and the translator have been asserted
in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

All the characters and events described in this novel are imaginary and
any similarity with real people or events is purely coincidental

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

PB ISBN 978–1–916725–034
eBook USC ISBN 978–1–916725–041
eBook ROW ISBN 978–1–916725–058

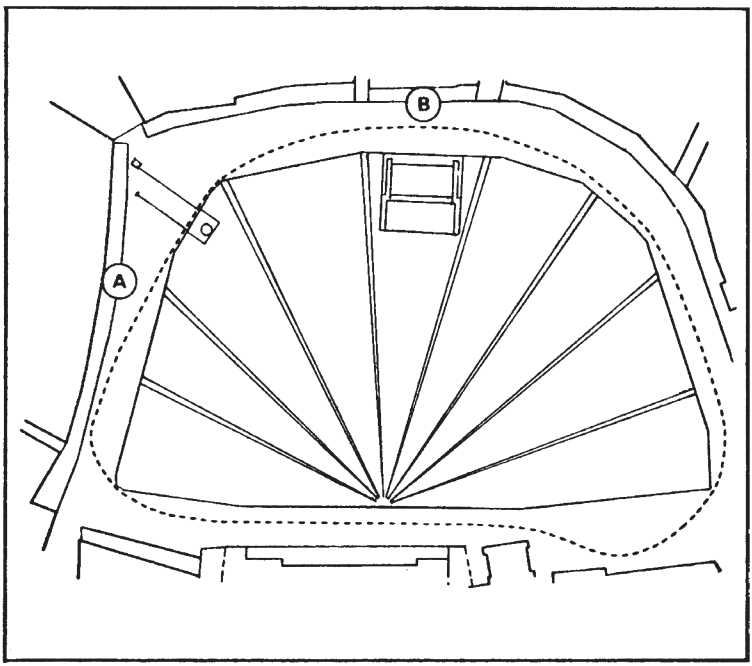
Typeset by Tetragon, London
Printed and bound by the CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY

CONTENTS

I	Avvocato Maggioni Has Been Looking Out	9
II	Gazing at the Historical Procession	19
III	There Are Seventeen *Contrade* in Siena	26
IV	Around the Concave, Sloping Piazza	37
V	The Lawyer Embraces Ginevra	50
VI	The *Contrade* of Siena, of Which There Are Now Seventeen	63
VII	The Servant Was About to Pour a Drink for Her	70
VIII	After the Invitation to Stay for Dinner	81
IX	Coca-Cola? Oh Yes, Thanks!	88
X	Emerging from a Side Street, Two White-Shirted Men	93
XI	In What Scene Will That Fine Guardian	99
XII	In an Hour at the Most	107
XIII	Just What Was He Doing There?	115
XIV	Ginevra Has Returned to the Window	126
XV	Valeria Didn't Grasp Her Husband's Crisis	132
XVI	A Tiny Pink Cloud	139

XVII	The Next Day, 15 August	148
XVIII	On the Morning of 16 August	159
XIX	So: The Standard-Bearers of All the *Contrade*	167
XX	The Piazza Is a Hysterical Funnel	175
XXI	Twenty Seconds. Twenty-Five Seconds	184
XXII	Grey Is the Horse, and Grey Suddenly	193
XXIII	The Area Around Siena – Suggests the Well-Known Voice	203

The authors thank Lorenzo and Titti Nepi
and Vittoria Bonelli Zondadari for their valuable advice.



Map of the Piazza del Campo in Siena where the Palio takes place, with the optimal route of the horses indicated by the dotted line.

The two circles indicate the position of Avvocato Maggioni (A) and that of his wife Valeria (B).

I

Avvocato Maggioni has been looking out of this window for a good half hour by now, and beneath him the procession that precedes the Siena Palio horse race continues to parade by very slowly.

The gently curved polygon of the Piazza del Campo blazes with a dazzling variety of colours, from the vivid tinctures of the banners to the pale ochres of the palazzi and the dizzying pointillism of the crowd, whose components are hemmed in by the ring of earth around which the race will be run or, like the lawyer, are leaning out of windows, balconies, podiums, merlons and garrets to contemplate the sumptuous serpent of the procession as it inches forward, halts, then moves again to the shrill sound of an endlessly repeated marching tune.

In the medieval costumes of the different *contrade* the lawyer keeps finding new shades and unexpected combinations among the bright or ashy blues, the purples and golds, the shy or resolute greens, the yellows, whites

and blacks, whose tones are forever being retouched by the flickering alternation of sunlight and shade. And he misses none of the shimmering splendours of the velvets, silks and brocades, the dull hues of boots, harnesses and jerkins, the intermittent gleams of cuirasses, crests, spurs and halberds.

Spectacular multiplicity. Captivating vision.

But Maggioni is not here to admire. He is not here, let's be frank, to enjoy himself. Rather, his eyes are surveying the scene; they are scrutinizing it.

Until the other day he knew practically nothing about the Palio, neither had he ever seen one. He had been in Siena perhaps three times in his life and never around 16 August (or 2 July). The Palio was for him just another of those folkloristic events that take place in so many cities, consisting of ten per cent tradition (more or less spurious) and ninety per cent tourism; he would never have imagined that his wife Valeria and he might end up involved in it. To what extent, in exactly what way, he doesn't yet know. But he has some clues, some strong suspicions.

Below his window the *contrada* of the Eagle has now halted. The drums roll, the yellow-gold banners, with the double-headed black eagle, soar high into the air, hover for an instant, fold in on themselves and drop back into the firm grips of the standard-bearers. There

is a roar of applause, while more distant roars, at intervals along the parade route, acclaim the aerial feats of other gaudy standards.

The older American woman to his right offers him her binoculars with a smile. Earlier it was he who had asked to borrow them, and ever since, at regular intervals, she has pressed them on him.

The lawyer removes his left arm from Ginevra's shoulders as she stands there with her elbows on the sill, her long blonde hair tumbling down towards the piazza as if to invite a lover to climb up. He adjusts the focus.

He at once zeroes in on his wife, over there, on the balcony of the Circolo degli Uniti, the Circle of the United. Valeria is frenziedly applauding the exhibition of the standard-bearers of the Wave, in white and blue. In three days, no, just two, the Wave has become her *contrada*. Wild enthusiasm, visceral participation, which initially of course amazed and irritated him. A woman like her, well balanced and full of housewifely discretion, going crazy over something that in no way concerns her, that she knows nothing at all about? I mean, seriously?

Poor Valeria, who now turns flirtatiously to the extremely handsome (so she thinks) man beside her. Blue shirt and cravat (Gucci?), noble forehead with yachtsman's tan, hair tinged with grey, aquiline nose, gleaming teeth. His name is Guidobaldo. He is a count. He has lands and castles hereabouts.

Valeria is smiling up at him (the count is of course very tall), fluttering her eyelashes (he must have convinced her that she has marvellous eyes). She says something with (he could bet on it) that new throaty voice of hers, which no one had ever heard her use until three days ago. He hands her a packet of Marlboro cigarettes with those long, strong fingers, and flicks a flame from a gold lighter (Cartier?).

Key moment from a TV ad, thinks Avvocato Maggioni. And the scene, bordering on the artificial, the constructed, the rigged, confirms certain suspicions and apprehensions that no longer have (or never did have) anything to do with jealousy. He lowers the angle of the binoculars, and on the edge of the racetrack a muscular attendant in jeans enters the scene, swigging from a bottle of Pepsi. There you go, thinks the lawyer, there you go.

He hands the binoculars back to the American woman, forcing a broad smile onto his face, and puts his arm around Ginevra's shoulders again; she straightens up, rubs her head and side against him like a young animal (a filly? a fawn? who can say?). Her hair, which is too blonde, too soft, gives off a perfume that is undefinable but can certainly be classified as provocative, at least to a middle-aged professional man. Is it the shampoo she uses? Or her eau de toilette? Or maybe a soap, a deodorant.

The lawyer kisses her on the neck, in any case (is that what she wants from him?), and reckons that right now he is being just as soppy and sickening as Valeria, over there with her count. Just as implausible.

Below the Torre del Mangia the band of trumpets and drums resumes its rudimentary marching tune, the *contrada* of the Eagle moves off at a rhythmical tramp, first the standard-bearers with the drummer, then the leader and the men-at-arms, then the principal pageboy with the big banner and all the other pageboys, the jockey in ceremonial gear on the parade horse led by the groom, the "*bàrbero*", bringing up the rear, while, with the same deliberate slowness, the *contrada* of the Porcupine moves forward in the same order, white with red, black and blue arabesques…

Lively, triumphant colours everywhere, before the lawyer's eyes. But he cannot accept this magnificent chromatic exaltation, this prodigious theatrical display, for what it is or appears to be. He is vigilant. He is wary. He is awaiting a sign, a resolutory clue that will clarify to him what has happened and is happening.

Until three days ago, Avvocato Maggioni had none of these problems. His life, if they had made it parade around the Piazza del Campo, would have formed an irredeemably drab, grey procession. Let's see: years of study, a few girls, a wife (pretty but nothing sensational),

two children (at a summer camp somewhere), a surprise-free career in the legal office of an insurance company. Add to this: an affair with a female colleague that finished after six months, an apartment in the mountains, stamp collecting as a hobby, a few all-inclusive holidays (New York, California, Egypt), a few culinary experiments for friends on a Sunday. Not much to wave a flag about.

But he had always been happy with things this way, he had never asked for anything more, he had never regretted not being, for example, a famous criminal defence lawyer, or a great financier, a great artist, he had never envied the figures from the world of sport, politics or show business who filled the pages of the weekly magazines bought religiously by his wife. With whom he had always had an uncomplicated relationship, the usual disagreements and misunderstandings to be found in any conversation manual (from "What I really can't bear is moaning" to "The truth is you're just dead selfish, like all men"); and as for carnal impulses, for some reason they had always been squeezed in between remarks of the type "For God's sake let's keep the noise down, Signora Zoli's back", and "Now, if you shift your elbow I'll phone that wretched plumber".

His had been a moderate or even a mediocre life. Obviously this is how he judges it now, looking at it, so to speak, from the window; but essentially he had been aware of this even before and without being too worried

about it. He would read statistics on the flu, on smoking, on consumption of poultry and eggs, and would happily recognize himself in the various percentages: that's me in these forty per cent that put very little sugar in their coffee, in these fifty-nine per cent who go on holiday in August.

Three days ago (13 August inst.), in a midsize car purchased by eighteen per cent of Italian car owners, Signor and Signora Maggioni were on their way from Milan to a farm between Arezzo and Siena where Valeria's brother had retired a few years ago to live "a different life" with a group of friends: all ex-managers, ex-bankers, ex-advertisers, ex-something or other who had had enough of the polluted and chaotic metropolis and who now cultivated first fruits and olives and sold preserves and wine at very dear prices; very dear people whom the lawyer could not take seriously.

"But I admire them," said Valeria as they turned off the main road, "they've had the courage to make a clean break. And it's also good business."

"Maybe, but it still seems like a kind of game to me."

"How can you call it a game when their hands are rough with calluses?"

"I don't know, all that stuff about going back to nature, the fruits of the earth, et cetera et cetera, it's just never convinced me."

"No, but you were so sure they'd all come crawling back home after six months with bad backs, and so now it bothers you that they've made a go of it. Even financially."

"I'd like to see their balance sheets. I'd be surprised if they break even."

"So what? At least they're leading a life that's healthier, more… authentic."

The other times they had been there, after a week of authentic life on the farm Valeria had always begun to assume the wistful expression of one secretly dreaming of the shop windows in Corso Vittorio Emanuele on a November evening. But that didn't stop her energetically defending the "clean break" of Paolino & Company, their exemplary devotion to tomatoes, rabbits and flies.

"A more genuine life," she reaffirmed.

Between short resumptions of the discussion and prolonged silences (there is no conversation manual for married couples in a car) the lawyer drove on towards the farm known as Le Rombaie at a moderate speed and with no forebodings of any sort.

Valeria later made the point that he could have driven faster, the road was good, there wasn't too much traffic. Yes, but then: who had delayed their departure from Milan with her final preparations ("Do you want the

blue pullover?", "Where on earth is the Portuguese shawl?") And in addition: if there hadn't been such a long queue at the Melegnano tollbooth… if they hadn't stopped for lunch in Parma… if…

The truth, thinks Maggioni, is that his wife, like all women, finds it hard to accept the idea of destiny – or of chance, to use a less grim word. She needs to trace the chain of events back link by link to discover the one she feels is crucial, decisive: the culprit to be seized by the neck. Even if nothing can be done about it now, she is left with the consolation (a meagre, pointless one) of thinking that one might have intervened, acted, sidestepped or taken preventive action. And she finds nothing illogical in including among the culprits the date of the thirteenth, notoriously inauspicious for travellers.

Any "reconstruction of events", even over a broken cup, should retrace the entire labyrinth of the past, examining every turning, every crossroads, every fork; it should recalculate from top to bottom the inconceivable sum of all data, both large and small, that lead all the way back to Adam and Eve.

But to be practical, reflects the lawyer, the most reasonable starting point in our case is the hailstorm. It's true: an hour earlier, an hour later, they would have avoided it. Let's say that destiny (*la sorte*, they call it in Siena) decided otherwise, and let us reconstruct the

encounter between this average couple, a little tired and sleepy from their journey, with a gathering of storm clouds that had amassed on 13 August, towards evening, over the hills between Arezzo and Siena.