

## SOLDIERS AND SICKLES (*The Countryman*, October 1937)

It is unusual for writers to hear such words as 'Here come the Intellectuals' spoken by working class people and common soldiers in tones of kindness and enthusiasm. And it was a new experience to see a harvest being reaped with sickles, and trodden out upon threshing floors.

This harvest on the long plain east of Madrid is significant in many ways. While the strange workings of Non-Intervention impede even foodstuffs from reaching that part of Spain which is loyal to the government, every ear of corn is important. I was told a story about this, while we sat quenching our midday thirst in the inn of Utiel, sitting in a large, bare, half darkened room, while, silhouetted against the blazing, light of the open doorway, the children of the town came in, at first shyly, then confidently, to walk exploringly around us, murmuring to each other those words we had already learned not to flinch at, 'These are the Intellectuals.' It was a writer who told me the story, Jeff Last. But he spoke as a soldier, for he has been fighting since the outbreak of the Franco revolt. This year, he said, the corn had ripened early. His regiment was holding a section of the line which runs through cornfields. The men, very many of them peasants, watched the corn with interest; presently, with passionate concern. For it was ready to reap, and in these acres dominated by war, there was no one to reap it. They watched the corn as patriots, too, knowing the importance of the harvest. They held a meeting, and decided that they themselves would reap it. Sickles were got and the corn behind the lines was reaped and stooked. But there was corn in front as well, in no man's land. Crawling out on their bellies, under threat of fire always and often under fire,

working in the time allotted to them for rest, they reaped the no man's land corn also. Between them and the enemy was an array of neat stooks. But who was to carry it? Each soldier is equipped with a blanket, and they carried the corn in their blankets, carrying the treasure back behind the lines to where common life began again, to where the mules trudged on the threshing floor and the barns could store the harvest.

That story was in my mind as we drove all day across the melancholy plain, with its few huddled villages. Scattered groups, elderly men and women mostly, stooped over the corn, repeating that movement that looks so harmonious, that in reality entails such ruthless fatigue. So they reaped when the corn was carried to the windmills of La Mancha against which Don Quixote aimed his spear.

But this year's harvest was different. It is the first of a new lineage of harvests, the first these peasants have reaped for themselves. But it is also the last, if things go as they should, of the old lineage of harvests. Those leagues of corn-land, immemorially fertile, vast rolling stretches of shallow tilth, demand a stronger technique of agriculture. It would be a perfect country for tractors. When the Spanish government can beat its swords into plough shares there will be deep ploughing here, the internal combustion engine will take the place of the mule and the donkey, science will reinforce the patient traditional skill of the *campesino* (peasant). When those days come, I thought, these lands will show a harvest worthy of those who will reap it. And afterwards, as though it were a promise of what should be, I saw, stepping down a hillside in the early golden dusk, a rank of pylons, ghostly silver, their delicate geometrical beauty most perfectly suited to the austere landscape of Castille.

How would they seem to Don Quixote, these strange apparitions? They might pull him out of his romances by what they could promise, a stranger news in this countryside than any romance, speaking of power and light coming to the darkened and the exploited, of education in the stead of ignorance, of houses for hovels, of the lives of free men for the lives of anxious bondage. But it is the children of Sancho Panza and Maria Gutierrez his wife who will best understand these promises.