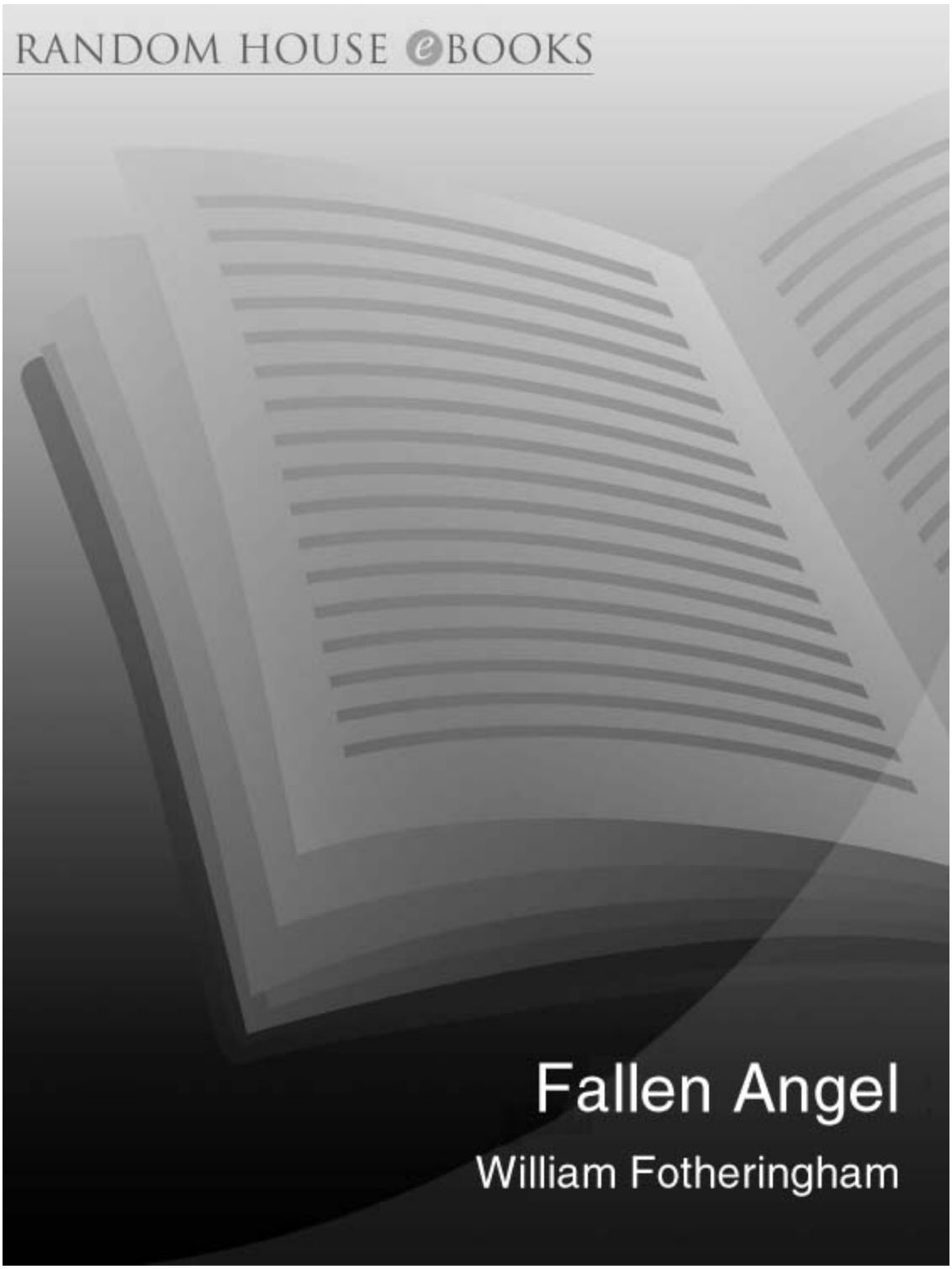
RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

# Fallen Angel

William Fotheringham

RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS



# Fallen Angel

William Fotheringham

WILLIAM FOTHERINGHAM

# FALLEN ANGEL

## THE PASSION OF

# FAUSTO COPPI

YELLOW JERSEY PRESS
LONDON

# FALLEN ANGEL

# CONTENTS

---

This eBook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licensed or publicly performed or used in any way except as specifically permitted in writing by the publishers, as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorised distribution or use of this text may be a direct infringement of the author’s and publisher’s rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781409077459

www.randomhouse.co.uk

Published by Yellow Jersey Press 2009

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Copyright © William Fotheringham 2009

William Fotheringham has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

Every effort has been made to contact all copyright holders, and the publishers will be pleased to correct any omissions brought to their notice at the earliest convenience.

First published in Great Britain in 2009 by Yellow Jersey Press Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA

www.rbooks.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at:www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

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

ISBN 9780224074476

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation. All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace approved FSC certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at www.rbooks.co.uk/environment

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain

by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

To Caroline, who took me to Italy

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book could not have been written without the assistance of the riders who gave up their time for interviews over the last few years, in some cases on several occasions. My most sincere thanks are therefore due to Alfredo Martini, Ubaldo Pugnaloni, Fiorenzo Magni, Sandrino Carrea, Raphael Geminiani, Jean Bobet, Ettore Milano, Nino Defilippis and Michele Gismondi.

Of the immediate Coppi family, Piero Coppi, Faustino Coppi and Marina Bellocchi *née* Coppi were unstintingly helpful. To Marina go particular thanks for showing me the letter quoted at length in the first chapter.

To my colleague Marco Pastonesi at *La Gazzetta dello Sport* I must add particular thanks for facilitating interviews with various former cyclists and members of the Coppi family, and opening the way to the archive at his newspaper.

At Yellow Jersey, I am indebted to Tristan Jones and Juliet Brooke for their patience and help. Thanks are also due to the sports editor at the *Guardian*, Ben Clissitt, and my agent John Pawsey, for their support.

As ever, though, it is to Caroline, Patrick and Miranda that I owe the most, for putting up with yet more absences and yet more hours chained to the desk.

## Also by William Fotheringham

**Put Me Back on My Bike: In Search of Tom Simpson**

**Roule Britannia: A History of Britons in the Tour de France**

## ILLUSTRATIONS

12–13 Coppi at the Tour of Spain in 1959 (courtesy of Offside)

14 Giulia Occhini with Coppi's body (courtesy of *La Gazzetta dello Sport*); fans in mourning around Coppi's coffin (courtesy of Offside)

15 Caricature of Coppi (reproduced in *The Treasures of the Tour de France*); idealised magazine cover *La Domenica del Corriere*; Coppi's bike at the Bianchi bicycle factory

16 Crowds outside the cemetery in Castellania surround Coppi's coffin (courtesy of Offside)

## A NOTE ON CURRENCIES

I have used both Italian lire and French francs throughout as appropriate.

It should be noted that, pre-war, the Italian lire was worth roughly 100 to the pound sterling, and roughly 20 to the dollar.

After the Allied invasion, the initial exchange rate was set at approximately 500 to the pound, or 120 to the US dollar; this rate was reset at 625 lire to the dollar in 1949.

The French franc was revalued in January 1960; in Coppi's era the currency is what was known as the 'old franc'. In 1949, when Coppi won the Tour de France for the first time, the exhange rate was roughly 1000 to the pound sterling (350 to the US dollar); by the end of the 1950s, it had declined to approximately 1400 to the pound (roughly 500 to the dollar).

## CHAPTER 1

# THE LETTER AND THE PHOTOGRAPH

At a quarter past four on 25 May 1949, Aunt Albina sits down next to her radio and begins to write on a single sheet of squared paper. Soon the afternoon's coverage of the Giro d'Italia will begin, and the announcer, Mario Ferretti, will tell her how Faustino and Serse have fared on the road to Salerno in Italy's national tour. This is the time of day the Coppi family shares with its two boys; in another house in the little village of Castellania, their mother, Albina's sister Angiolina, is also sitting, waiting for Ferretti to pick up his microphone. Just outside, in the little field they call Campo del Mù, Albina's husband Giuseppe is cutting the hay; for the three weeks of the race, each day's work is planned so that he will be within reach of the house now, ready to run to the radio.

How to tell Faustino and Serse what they all feel? The boys are always on their minds. What could be more natural? The Coppi brothers have won such fame, Faustino with his Giro d'Italia wins and his Italian national titles, Serse with his unstinting work in support. Each time they come back from their great races – as far away as Naples or Rome, sometimes even France or Switzerland – they bring back fine things: Angiolina's fridge, her radio. The family have such good clothes now and want for nothing; no one in the village has seen anything like Faustino's new Fiat. But it is not so long ago that the brothers were at Albina's school, inseparable even then. Faustino had always been mad about that bike of his; one day, she had had to

mark him ‘absent’ in the register when he went out cycling and forgot to come back. How she had told him off.

Giuseppe is certain Faustino will win on the climbs; Albina can say that in her letter. She must tell them of the prayers the family say each day for their boys’ safe return, the tears she and Angiolina shed each time Faustino wins, and she can remind them to wear their medallions with the image of the Pilgrim Madonna. She must be sure to have Angiolina sign the letter, and Giuseppe, so that the boys know they are all thinking of them. Above all, she must make a point of including Serse, so often in his elder brother’s shadow, but so loyal, and as lively still as when Faustino first brought him to school.

Aunt Albina writes with a script so close and neat it might have come off a printing press. A lady of precise mind, she times and dates the letter. Many years later, it will be passed on to Faustino’s daughter Marina. Sixty years on, the letter seems surprisingly formal. Perhaps it is because Albina is the village teacher and thus elected to write on the family’s behalf. She sends the ‘most fervent’ prayers of this ‘church family’ – Albina and Angiolina’s uncle is a priest. The Immaculate Madonna will bless them, will give Faustino the strength to be victorious, to pull on the pink jersey awarded to the race leader.

‘Obviously we discuss what is going on,’ she continues. ‘Your uncle talks about you with a fervour and affection that you cannot imagine. On the days you finished first I cried, and I’m still crying for joy. Well done, Faustino, well done, and go on. You will be carried along the way you have chosen by your intelligence, your good sense and your experience.’

To Serse, she writes: ‘With your good character, your willpower, your strength, you will be the finest and greatest help to your big brother. You will give him encouragement even if you go through difficult times.’ She sends hugs and kisses, ‘with the greatest affection, your most affectionate

uncle and aunt Giuseppe and Albina'. There is a scribble from Angiolina on the bottom of the letter: 'love from Mamma, hope all goes well'. Uncle Giuseppe's signature is heavier, thicker.

Aunt Albina's close, regular handwriting evokes a lost world, a pastoral idyll of summer haymaking. The women sit in the parlour, listening for news, waiting for the return of the men who have left the land to seek their fortunes. Whether they quite understand the intricacies of the faraway world of bike racing is unlikely. That does not matter. Faustino and Serse may be a long way from home, but they will understand their importance to their family, feel the simple power of their relatives' love, know the depth of their Catholic faith.

* * *

The photograph, on the other hand, is more troubling. Four years later, Fausto Coppi stands on the podium of the world road race championship in Lugano. He has just pulled on the winner's rainbow-striped jersey. As he waves the victor's bouquet, his face comes as close to a smile as he ever manages to muster. The lower lip curves; the upper remains straight; only the creases in his cheeks show that this is a moment of pure joy. He has just clinched the only major title that has so far eluded him. There can now be no debate: he is the greatest cyclist ever. His title, *campionissimo* – champion of champions – is not mere hyperbole.

By 30 August 1953 Coppi had twice achieved the 'double' everyone thought was impossible: victories in the Tour de France and Giro d'Italia in the same year. At the World's that day he dominated the race in the style that was to become his hallmark: he waited for the moment until he

felt the opposition tiring, then dramatically raised the pace until no one could stay with him. The final fifty miles were a triumphant, if painful, procession in front of the hundreds of thousands of fans who had flocked over the Italian border.

Coppi's rainbow jersey doesn't quite fit over the deep blue tunic of the Italian team, stained with sweat after 165 miles in the sweltering heat on the hilly circuit above the lake. Alongside the cyclist are the usual dignitaries in suits and ties, the mayor of Lugano, the cycling federation president; behind are onlookers craning their necks.

At the shoulders of the men in suits, however, stands a woman. A woman with immaculately coiffed dark hair swept back from her forehead, eyebrows tightly plucked into two perfect lines, dazzling teeth, a chunky gold bracelet on her right wrist, a distinguished black dress and a jawline that hints at the unstoppable force of a battleship's prow.

It was the presence of the woman, Giulia Locatelli, which made a routine podium photograph into one of the most reproduced images in Italian sport. To this day, no one quite knows how Coppi's mistress cajoled, argued, pushed her way into forbidden territory to pass him the flowers in an almost peremptory gesture captured by the television cameras. She was alongside her lover in his moment of triumph, to share the acclaim of the hundreds of thousands of Italian fans, to be pictured alongside him in the next morning's newspapers. It was the moment their love affair became public, because she had decided that it should be so. For an Italian, the image has the same power as the moment in the Profumo scandal in Britain in the early sixties when Mandy Rice-Davies answered: 'He would say that, wouldn't he?'

The affair had been going on for some months. It had been rumoured in the closed world of cycling that the biggest name in the sport had a dark-haired mistress. All

was not well, it was said, with his marriage of nearly eight years, in spite of Coppi's love for his daughter Marina. Cycling champions often strayed as they flitted from race to race, and in most cases what happened on the road remained hidden. They were good husbands at home so people turned a blind eye. But Giulia's determined move put the affair in the public gaze. In 1950s Italy adultery was still illegal. This was an act of colossal daring, many would say sheer folly.

When Coppi left his wife Bruna for Giulia soon afterwards, such an act of open immorality could not be allowed to go unchecked. The Pope publicly expressed his displeasure and became involved in fruitless moves to restore the marriage. The police dragged Giulia and Fausto from their beds in an attempt to prove their illicit liaison. The woman, the guilty party in the eyes of the law, was briefly thrown into prison. The adultery trial was brief but vicious, the bitter little details of marital breakdown mulled over in public. The children were called as witnesses. The sentences were suspended, but the case remains a landmark nonetheless: a major public figure and his mistress prosecuted for adultery just as Italy was turning into a secular society, developing into a modern European state.

The Lugano world championship marked a turning point for Coppi in another sense. It was one of the last major races he won. He was nearly thirty-four: his glittering career was all but over, his decline inexorable in spite of his best efforts, the more marked because no matter how poorly he performed he could never be anonymous. When he struggled, it was noticed. Inevitably, the scarlet woman was blamed for his decline; even for his premature, controversial death. Within cycling, she would never be forgiven, not on moral grounds, but for emasculating the champion of champions.

Coppi is Italian sport's immortal hero. '*Coppi viva, Coppi il mito*' – Coppi lives on, Coppi the myth – say the placards at the great races, the Giro, the Tour de France, and they are right. He remains a mythical figure nearly fifty years after his death. Walk into the reception at *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, the paper that embodies the spirit of Italian sport, and there in front of you is a life-size black and white picture of a man on a bike: Coppi. Not a Ferrari, not a footballer, but the cyclist. In the Giro each year, the highest mountain is given the title *Cima Coppi*, the Coppi summit. No French or Spanish champion is remembered this way in their home Tours. And who can count the number of Italian cycling clubs called Gruppo Sportivo Coppi?

Every era is marked by the emergence of a possible 'new Coppi' amid much speculation. On the fortieth anniversary of his death, a video of his life sold 60,000 copies in a few days. Half a billion lire was spent on an elaborate memorial in Turin. And it was Coppi who was voted the most popular Italian sportsman of the twentieth century, ahead of the great skier Alberto Tomba and the motor racing legend Enzo Ferrari. Not a footballer within a mile of him.

Coppi has moved way beyond his sport. He is now immortalised in opera, film, television docudrama, experimental works by classical composers, sculpture, painting, ceramics and T-shirts as well as in print. Memorials to his name stand on high Alpine passes and obscure climbs in distant parts of Italy. The writer Bruno Raschi called the obsession with *il campionissimo* 'inexplicable … an irrational over-reaction to his memory and to his earthly image. No athlete is wept over in this way. No other has brought forth so many memories or has had a destiny of this kind. And no one has decided that it should be so.'

No one decided that Coppi should be wept over, in the same way that no one quite knows why the obsession with Coppi has endured. The answer lies in the gulf between the

letter and the photograph, between the world of Aunt Albina and the image snatched at the world championship in Lugano. In the four years and four months between the two, her Faustino, the boy from the tiny hamlet of Castellania, had become Fausto, the greatest cyclist in the world, a figure who dominated his sport. The photograph subverted and transformed the image of Italy's greatest sports star of the post-war years. It marks the moment when the idol was shown to have feet of clay, when the simple country boy of the letter suddenly became a far more complex and controversial figure. Coppi's mythical status, the tears that are still shed, stem from one essential question: how did the Faustino of the letter become the Fausto of the photograph?

CHAPTER 2

# TO RACE A BIKE, YOU NEED TO BE A POOR MAN

Castellania is almost the end of the road. Only a few hamlets and farms lie beyond the village, where the foothills of the Apennines rise up, wave after wave, steep green valleys, wooded hilltops, pocket-handkerchief vineyards, lonely towers. Like the other villages in this part of north-west Italy, Castellania is not thriving. Not all the houses are lived in and there are few signs of active agriculture, although the Catholic organisation Opus Dei is investing in the village in a move which may well revitalise it. The population has declined as the small farms no longer support more than one or two people. At one time there were ten families called Coppi in the village; today there are only four. The population is now well below fifty, where once it was three hundred, and those who are left are ageing: only three children have been born here in the last twenty years. The school closed in the 1960s. The hills feel empty, silent but for birdsong.

Armando Baselica is warming himself in the April sun, sitting in an old chair repaired with planks. Behind him, a maize field slopes away and the mountains rise up, their summits still flecked with snow. If there were anything of note happening in Castellania he would have a grandstand view, but the village is sleeping. At eighty-four, Baselica, wizened and bullet-headed, has earned the right to a little rest. He is the last man here whose life ran parallel with that of the village’s only famous son. He was born in 1922,

went to the village school with Faustino Coppi in the late 1920s during the rise of fascism, left his studies to work in the fields, quit the hilltop to fight in Mussolini's war, returned a changed man. Had cycling not intervened, had he not been successful, Coppi might well have ended his life like this old man: sitting in peace in the spring sun watching a very small world go gently by.

Coppi and Baselica were part of the last generation who can bear witness to a lifestyle that has now all but disappeared from Italy. The world of subsistence farming by small peasant communities had changed little in its essence since medieval times, but it is now largely a memory, and even those who can recall it are dying out. This is the life from which Coppi escaped, as did so many, because the road out of the village was the only one offering any relief from hard labour and little reward. Baselica can describe life here in a single word: '*miseria*'. Poverty.

The hills are attractively rounded and green as they rise from the plain. The vineyards stand in neat rows. The maize fields swish gently in the spring breeze. But the fields were not easily worked when the work was done by hand, ploughing with oxen, swinging the double-pronged spade known as the *zappa* to break the clods for planting. The fields are clay and turn to mud when the autumn rains come. 'It takes the thighs of a horse to lift your feet out of the mud,' said the journalist Gianni Brera.

Up here, 1,000 feet above sea level, a living had to be scratched from the land, supplemented by selling wood, maize, and the relatively poor wine from the local grapes. The peasants kept chickens, rabbits, a pig or two – vital as the source of hams and salami that would last a year – and perhaps a cow. Once a week, they made bread in a wood-burning oven, bread that, says Baselica, improved over the eight days it was kept. The houses contained only the

essentials: one book, perhaps, passed down from brother to sister, might have to last ten years.

Isolation and the shared need for survival meant the people in the village were closely knit, ‘like a big family’, as Baselica puts it: tasks such as harvesting maize were shared cooperatively; the maize would be ground with a handmill to make the flour for *polenta*, the staple form of carbohydrate. *Miseria*, Baselica may call it, but it was not unremittingly grim. The day dedicated to the village’s patron saint, San Biagio, was celebrated with two days of dancing and eating: ‘rice, meat, chickens, *agnolotti* on the second day’.

In part of *Love and War in the Apennines*, a classic tale of life as an escaped prisoner of war in Italy between 1943 and 1944, Eric Newby documented daily life in a peasant house-hold further south along the mountain range from Castellania. By the midday meal Newby and his fellow workers on the farm are already sleeping over their food through physical exhaustion. ‘I had always thought of Italian *contadini* as a race of people who sat basking in the sun before the doors of their houses while the seed which they had inserted in the earth in the course of a couple of mornings’ work burgeoned without their having to do anything but watch this process take place. I now knew differently. These people were fighting to survive in an inhospitable terrain from which the larger part of the inhabitants had either emigrated to the cities or to the United States or South America.’

* * *

Casa Coppi, Fausto’s home until he left to seek his fortune on two wheels, is one of the biggest of the twenty-five or so houses in the village, a three-storey yellow building on the

south side of the cluster of dwellings and barns. It follows what is clearly a typical local pattern: a long, thin house, along- side a two-storey open-fronted barn used to store hay, maize and piles of stakes for growing tomatoes. The house has barely changed since Coppi's time: the cyclist's mother Angiolina lived here until her death in 1962, after which it was shut up until it was turned into a museum in 2000.

Today, the contents are a curious mix of traditional peasant fittings and slightly incongruous, highly polished furniture from the 1940s and 1950s, presumably bought as Fausto's winnings accumulated. The large kitchen on the ground floor still has its sloping stone sink, but alongside is a new-looking wood-burning cooking range. Sadly, there is no sign of the fridge, which was Coppi's first gift to his mother. She never knew exactly what it was for and kept her underwear in it, he said, while at other times she used it to store kindling for the fire. He would never have the heart to tell her its real purpose.

The sitting room has the single-channel television Coppi bought for the family – the first in the village – but retains the myriad hooks in the ceiling for hanging hams, grapes and salami. Upstairs, both Fausto's and Serse's bedrooms contain '*preti*' – priests – the sledge-like contraptions containing an earthenware pot, used for heating the beds with coals from the stove, which were the cause of many a house fire. The cot Coppi slept in as a child, with its uncomfortable looking metal frame, still stands in his parents' room, a cord still attached to one side so it can be rocked from the bed.

The Coppi family were small peasant farmers like the rest of the population, but they were slightly better off than many of their neighbours: a four-ox family where the norm was two, farming some thirteen hectares, some of it rented, but still well above the average for a holding in rural Italy. It was not enough to feed everyone, however, and Fausto's

father, Domenico, had no choice but to hire his services out to other local farmers. Thin-faced, moustached, Domenico was a good-looking man, reputed to have had an eye for a pretty face. According to one biographer, Jean-Paul Ollivier, Domenico's marriage to Angiolina Boveri, the niece of the local priest, was a shotgun affair. Their elder daughter Maria was born three months after the wedding.

Angelo-Fausto was their second son, their fourth child after their daughters Maria and Dina and their eldest son Livio. He was born on the ground floor of the house at 5 p.m. on 15 September 1919 while Domenico was working in the fields. It was his father who wanted to christen him Fausto, the family name; his mother felt he should be named Angelo after his grandfather and he was always referred to in official documents by both names. From his father, he would inherit a long, thin neck and almost Slavic cheekbones; from his mother a prominent Roman nose in the middle of a roundish face. He soon acquired the nickname Faustino, the diminutive due partly to his slender physique but also to distinguish him from his uncle of the same name.

The Coppis had lived in these parts since the seventeenth century, and were more than mere labourers, although Faustino's family were not the best educated or the most ambitious of the clan. While Domenico worked the land, his brother Giuseppe Luigi was the mayor, his sister-in-law Albina the schoolteacher. The other brother, Giuseppe Fausto, had left to make his fortune as a sea captain, and appears to have ended up as the honorary head of the family. Initially Domenico and Angiolina lived in the house behind Casa Coppi, a smaller building which has recently been turned into the Grande Airone restaurant. Gradually they took over the larger property in front across the courtyard, and eventually its ten rooms were the home of an extended family of eleven people including various aunts, Fausto and, briefly, his wife Bruna.

Later, much was made of the fact that Fausto Coppi was transformed from a physically unprepossessing youth into the greatest athlete of his generation. Writers speculated over the reasons for his scrawny physique. There was a theory that Faustino and his younger brother Serse, born in 1923, were both slightly stunted because their father's genes had been affected by the strong liquor given to him when he was a soldier in the First World War before they were conceived. Another popular myth was that Coppi suffered more broken bones than the average cyclist because his frame was weakened by a vitamin deficiency similar to rickets. Small and skinny he may have been, but he was clearly strong, although Livio must have been exaggerating when he recalled 'he could carry 100 kilos on his shoulders when he was eleven'.

Faustino was not a brawny boy, but this was nothing exceptional. A photograph from the early 1930s shows Livio, Dina and Faustino with the outsized eyes and stick legs of undernourished children, looking old beyond their years in their heavy outdoor boots and oversize, handed-down shorts. All the local children were like that: as Baselica recalls, the youngsters in the single class of pupils from Castellania and three or four surrounding villages were 'like organ pipes: thin and small, thin and medium sized, thin and tall, thin and bald, thin and hairy. All thin.'

Faustino and Serse were already close in spite of the four-year difference between them, a relationship that lasted until the younger brother's premature death in 1951. Faustino had begun Serse's schooling for him by refusing to go to class unless his little sibling went as well. Despite their closeness, they were 'like night and day', Baselica recalls. Fausto was well behaved at home, 'Serse was never still', less obedient, merrier.

Fausto worked hard at school, where their attendance would depend in part on whether they were needed in the fields; when they were there they were taught about

Romulus and Remus, the River Po, Mont Blanc and the difference between animal and mineral by Faustino's lively, tough little aunt, Albina. She maintained discipline with the help of a collection of sticks kept behind her desk: thin, thick, supple, knotty, 'the right one for each infraction'. Put your hands out, she would order. But I'm your nephew, Serse, Faustino or their cousin Piero would reply. Put your hands out, you big ugly boy, she would repeat. At catechism in the church, an uncle Coppi presided with the help of a collection of sticks to match their aunt's at school. Not surprisingly with the church connection on Angiolina's side of the family, the Coppis were '*gente di chiesa*', religious people: missing a service meant trouble, recalls Piero.

When not at school or working alongside their parents on the farm, the boys played a version of hopscotch, and sometimes stole fruit, which wasn't mere mischief: they were always hungry. They played soccer with a ball made of rags until it split, or until one of the boys went to tell the owner of the field that they were ruining his grass; out would come the peasant brandishing a stick, and they would run away laughing fit to burst. Serse tended to be the prankster among the children; Fausto was as serious a child as he would be as an adult.

Coppi's first bike was a reject, picked up from a corner where it had been abandoned because it was virtually unusable. He had no money, so he restored it to working order as best he could. He remembered a frame with the chrome cracking off it, so big that he had trouble getting his leg over the crossbar. On 17 October 1927, Albina wrote the letter A, for absent, against the boy's name in the school register. The eight-year-old Faustino had gone out on his bike that day and played truant, so she made him write out one hundred times: 'I must go to school and not ride my bicycle.' On their clunky old machines, the boys played at bike racing, running time trials where the lack of a stopwatch did not matter: one of them would count the

seconds out loud. One such bike racing game was the Giro d'Italia.

That reflected the fact that in the time before the rise of football, cycling was Italy's most popular sport. Although cycle ownership was lower than in France or Britain, the bike was the main means of transport for most of the population. Since its foundation in 1909, the Giro had drawn the country together, bringing its glamour and festival atmosphere to the most far-flung areas. As well as the great one-day Classics such as Milan–San Remo and the Giro di Lombardia, monuments of the sport even today, a host of regional one-day races such as the Giro del Veneto, Tre Valli Varesine, Milan–Turin and the Giro del Piemonte drew massive crowds. The *tifosi* thronged to watch the stars at exhibition events on short circuits and banked velodromes, and the start contracts for the cyclists were correspondingly fat.

The first great national rivalry of Italian cycling, between the *campionissimi* – champions of champions – Alfredo Binda and Learco Guerra, had caught the popular imagination. Internationally, Italy could boast the first world road champion in Binda (1927) and a brace of Tour de France wins for Ottavio Bottecchia in 1924 and 1925. Together with Tuscany to the south and Lombardy to the east, the Piedmont of Coppi's childhood was a hotbed of the sport, producing champions such as Gerbi, Brunero and Costante Girardengo, whose home was in Novi Ligure, on the plain below Castellania. As well as the *campioni* and *campionissimi*, the men who made the serious money, there were decent pickings to be had for the *gregari*, the lesser lights who helped the great men in the big races and made up the numbers in the exhibition races.

When a journalist went to Castellania with Coppi in the 1940s, the cyclist said simply: 'Do you understand now why I became a cyclist? What could I do other than go off on my bike?' The parallels between subsistence farming and the

life of a professional cyclist are surprisingly close: both entail hours of repetitive physical labour in the open air, in all weathers, with no certainty that all the effort will have its due reward. For all the drama of the breakaway or the sprint, the podium girls and the chance of prize money, there was a distinctly unglamorous side to cycling in those days: saddle boils from the poor roads, sickness from an uncertain diet, the bizarre remedies peddled by team helpers. The professional cyclist had to accept adversity – punctures, crashes, stronger rivals, capricious team managers, poor wages – with the stoicism with which a peasant views the weather.

Cycling was physically demanding, but it was better than the unremitting drudgery of working the land. As the Irish farmer turned racer Sean Kelly said two generations later, at least when you were on your bike you got paid more for being out in the rain all day. That was ever the case for professional cyclists who were not *campionissimi* or even *campioni*. Coppi's contemporary Alfredo Martini explained: 'When I left to go training early in the morning, the peasants were already in the fields; my father, my brother, bent over the spades thinking only of work and fatigue. I would ride two hundred kilometres in training and when I came back in the evening, tired but happy from the long trip, I would see the same people still thinking only of the same tiring and repetitive work.'

'Cycle racing opened the doors to a world forbidden to mere mortals,' writes the historian Daniele Marchesini. As well as the financial rewards and the chance to eat foodstuffs never seen on peasant farmers' tables, cycle racing offered the chance to travel, a glamorous business at a time when the nearest market town was a major excursion for many. Martini told of the pride he felt on returning home with the labels of the best hotels in Paris and Brussels stuck on his suitcase. 'Cycling meant leaving the status of peasant behind and travelling the world,