

EAST WEST

What's Best?

By Capt. M. J. MASON M.C.

CAREFULLY PLACING the bunch of grapes on the fruit-dish, my wife remarked: "Aren't they beauties, and so cheap, too? Only 4s. a pound!" Her face wore the pleased look of the thrifty housewife who has had good value for her money.

Obediently I looked at the bowl: they did not look so good to me. Only Barese Sultanas—a common type, of insipid taste. Now, if they had been those luscious Reginas, large as a passion-fruit, shiny as a thoroughbred, and nearly bursting with juice: then there would be something to it. But Barese Sultanas; no, I just was not interested.

The expression on my face must have piqued her. "Yes, I know they're not as good as those you used to get in Italy. But they're jolly nice, and if you won't eat them, Susie and I will."

She and Susie ate then, all right, but they were neither of them as practised as I was. Probably they got about a half between them. You see, they spat out the seeds and skins, and an expert never does that.

It was about eighteen months ago that I learned how the experts ate grapes. Straight after the Armistice with Italy, in September, 1943, in fact. The grape harvesting was in full swing then, and throughout the country labour was scarce. Even grandpa and grandma, usually exempt from work in the fields, had to lend a hand, while the modest contribution of toddlers of four and five was gladly accepted. So when Jim and I arrived at a farm and asked for food and shelter, offering in return to help with the work where we could, we were made very welcome.

Jim Stone and I were escaped prisoners of war. After the collapse of Italy, the Germans had swiftly taken over the various prison camps and had transported the unfortunate inmates to Germany. But Jim and I had had a lucky break *en route*, and some forty miles south of the Austrian border we had managed to jump the train and get away safely. So we were working our way down the peninsula to meet the Allies, and in return for the essentials of life we lent assistance where we could.

When we had offered to help out with the work we had rather visualized doing odd jobs and chores round the farm. We had not bargained on being roped in for the regular work of the place or on putting in the same hours as the regular hands. There is no such thing as the forty-hour week in Italy, or even a half-holiday Saturday: the peasants work from sunrise to sunset, and there is no slacking, either. Rather lucky for us, really, that the day only lasted for about twelve hours. Why, we might have been there in mid-summer, with its sixteen hours of daylight.

But, taken all round, grape-picking is not a bad game at all. There are no thorns or prickles to worry you, and you do not have to pick away for about ten minutes to produce anything worthwhile. And there is a spice of danger to it, too: you never know when you are going to upset a colony of wasps that have chosen a certain bunch as their private larder for the week, and are grimly determined to defend their rations. And, of course, there are compensations, like those for the boy who has been left to mind the sweet-shop for the day.