Shoot! – Book I

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In Italiano – Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio, operatore

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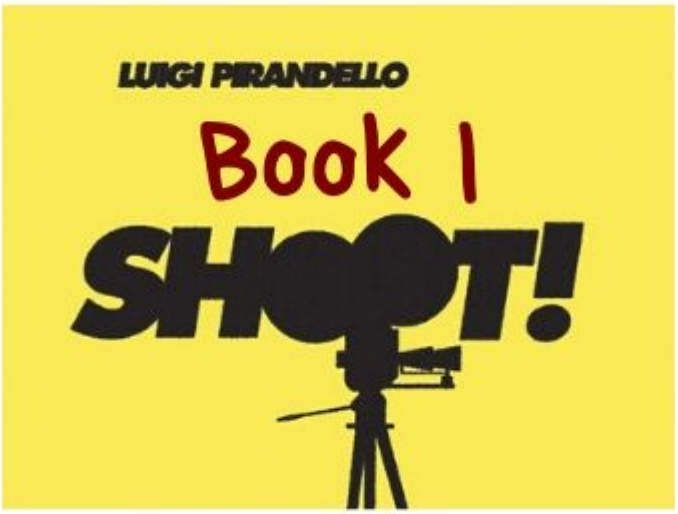

Shoot! – Book I

1.

I study people in their most ordinary occupations, to see if I can succeed in discovering in others what I feel that I myself lack in everything that I do: the certainty that they understand what they are doing.
At first sight it does indeed seem as though many of them had this certainty, from the way in which they look at and greet one another, hurrying to and fro in pursuit of their business or their pleasure. But afterwards, if I stop and gaze for a moment in their eyes with my own intent and silent eyes, at

once they begin to take offence. Some of them, in fact, are so disturbed and perplexed that I have only to keep on gazing at them for a little longer, for them to insult or assault me.

No, go your ways in peace. This is enough for me: to know, gentlemen, that there is nothing clear or certain to you either, not even the little that is determined for you from time to time by the absolutely familiar conditions in which you are living.

There is a _something more_ in everything. You do not wish or do not know how to see it. But the moment this something more gleams in the eyes of an idle person like myself, who has set himself to observe you, why, you become puzzled, disturbed or irritated.
I too am acquainted with the external, that is to say the mechanical framework of the life which keeps us clamorously and dizzily occupied and gives us no rest.

To-day, such-and-such; this and that to be done hurrying to one place, watch in hand, so as to be in time at another.

“No, my dear fellow, thank you: I can’t!”

“No, really? Lucky fellow! I must be off….” At eleven, luncheon.

The paper, the house, the office, school. … “A fine day, worse luck! But business….”

“What’s this? Ah, a funeral.”

We lift our hats as we pass to the man who has made his escape. The shop, the works, the law courts….

No one has the time or the capacity to stop for a moment to consider whether what he sees other people do, what he does himself, is really the right thing, the thing that can give him that absolute certainty, in which alone a man can find rest. The rest that is given us after all the clamour and

dizziness is burdened with such a load of weariness, so stunned and deafened, that it is no longer possible for us to snatch a moment for thought. With one hand we hold our heads, the other we wave in a drunken sweep.
“Let us have a little amusement!”
Yes. More wearying and complicated than our work do we find the amusements that are offered us; since from our rest we derive nothing but an increase of weariness.

I look at the women in the street, note how they are dressed, how they walk, the hats they wear on their heads; at the men, and the airs they have or give themselves; I listen to their talk, their plans; and at times it seems to me so impossible to believe in the reality of all that I see and hear, that being incapable, on the other hand, of believing that they are all doing it as a joke, I ask myself whether really all this clamorous and dizzy machinery of life, which from day to day seems to become more complicated and to move with greater speed, has not reduced the human race to such a condition of insanity that presently we must break out in fury and overthrow and destroy everything. It would, perhaps, all things considered, be so much to the good. In one respect only, though: to make a clean sweep and start afresh.

Here in this country we have not yet reached the point of witnessing the spectacle, said to be quite common in America, of men who, while engaged in carrying on their business, amid the tumult of life, fall to the ground, paralysed. But perhaps, with the help of God, we shall soon reach it. I know that all sorts of things are in preparation. Ah, yes, the work goes on! And I, in my humble way, am one of those employed on this work _to provide amusement_. I am an operator. But, as a matter of fact, being an operator, in the world in which I live and upon which I live, does not in the least mean operating. I operate nothing.
This is what I do. I set up my machine on its knock-kneed tripod. One or more stage hands, following my directions, mark

out on the carpet or on the stage with a long wand and a blue pencil the limits within which the actors have to move to keep the picture in focus.
This is called _marking out the ground_.
The others mark it out, not I: I do nothing more than apply my eyes to the machine so that I can indicate how far it will manage to _take_.
When the stage is set, the producer arranges the actors on it, and outlines to them the action to be gone through.
I say to the producer:
“How many feet?”
The producer, according to the length of the scene, tells me approximately the number of feet of film that I shall need, then calls to the actors:
“Are you ready? Shoot!”
And I start turning the handle.
I might indulge myself in the illusion that, by turning the handle, I set these actors in motion, just as an organ-grinder creates the music by turning his handle. But I allow myself neither this nor any other illusion, and keep on turning until the scene is finished; then I look at the machine and inform the producer:
“Sixty feet,” or “a hundred and twenty.”
And that is all.
A gentleman, who had come out of curiosity, asked me once:
“Excuse me, but haven’t they yet discovered a way of making the camera go by itself?”
I can still see that gentleman’s face; delicate, pale, with thin, fair hair; keen, blue eyes; a pointed, yellowish beard, behind which there lurked a faint smile, that tried to appear timid and polite, but was really malicious. For by his question he meant to say to me:
“Is there any real necessity for you? What are you? _A hand that turns the handle_. Couldn’t they do without this hand? Couldn’t you be eliminated, replaced by some piece of machinery?”
I smiled as I answered:

“In time, Sir, perhaps. To tell you the truth, the chief quality that is required in a man of my profession is _impassivity_ in face of the action that is going on in front of the camera. A piece of machinery, in that respect, would doubtless be better suited, and preferable to a man. But the most serious difficulty, at present, is this: where to find a machine that can regulate its movements according to the action that is going on in front of the camera. Because I, my dear Sir, do not always turn the handle at the same speed, but faster or slower as may be required. I have no doubt, however, that in time, Sir, they will succeed in eliminating me. The machine—this machine too, like all the other machines—will go by itself. But what mankind will do then, after all the machines have been taught to go by themselves, that, my dear Sir, still remains to be seen.”

2.

I satisfy, by writing, a need to let off steam which is overpowering. I get rid of my professional impassivity, and avenge myself as well; and with myself avenge ever so many others, condemned like myself to be nothing more than _a hand that turns a handle_.

This was bound to happen, and it has happened at last!

Man who first of all, as a poet, deified his own feelings and worshipped them, now having flung aside every feeling, as an encumbrance not only useless but positively harmful, and having become clever and industrious, has set to work to fashion out of iron and steel his new deities, and has become a servant and a slave to them.

Long live the Machine that mechanises life!

Do you still retain, gentlemen, a little soul, a little heart and a little mind? Give them, give them over to the greedy machines, which are waiting for them! You shall see and hear the sort of product, the exquisite stupidities they will manage to extract from them.

To pacify their hunger, in the urgent haste to satiate them, what food can you extract from yourselves every day, every

hour, every minute?
It is, perforce, the triumph of stupidity, after all the ingenuity and research that have been expended on the creation of these monsters, which ought to have remained instruments, and have instead become, perforce, our masters.
The machine is made to act, to move, it requires to swallow up our soul, to devour our life. And how do you expect them to be given back to us, our life and soul, in a centuplicated and continuous output, by the machines? Let me tell you: in bits and morsels, all of one pattern, stupid and precise, which would make, if placed one on top of another, a pyramid that might reach to the stars. Stars, gentlemen, no! Don't you believe it. Not even to the height of a telegraph pole.
A breath stirs it and down it tumbles, and leaves such a litter, only not inside this time but outside us, that—Lord, look at all the boxes, big, little, round, square—we no longer know where to set our feet, how to move a step. These are the products of our soul, the
pasteboard boxes of our life.
What is to be done? I am here. I serve my machine, in so far as I turn the handle so that it may eat. But my soul does not serve me. My hand serves me, that is to say serves the machine. The human soul for food, life for food, you must supply, gentlemen, to the machine whose handle I turn. I shall be amused to see, with your permission, the product that will come out at the other end. A fine product and a rare entertainment, I can promise you.
Already my eyes and my ears too, from force of habit, are beginning to see and hear everything in the guise of this rapid, quivering, ticking mechanical reproduction.
I don't deny it; the outward appearance is light and vivid. We move, we fly. And the breeze stirred by our flight produces an alert, joyous, keen agitation, and sweeps away every thought. On! On, that we may not have time nor power to heed the burden of sorrow, the degradation of shame which remain within us, in our hearts. Outside, there is a continuous glare, an incessant giddiness: everything flickers and disappears.

“What was that?” Nothing, it has passed! Perhaps it was something sad; but no matter, it has passed now.
There is one nuisance, however, that does not pass away. Do you hear it? A hornet that is always buzzing, forbidding, grim, surly, diffused, and never stops. What is it? The hum of the telegraph poles? The endless scream of the trolley along the overhead wire of the electric trams? The urgent throb of all those countless machines, near and far? That of the engine of the motor-car? Of the cinematograph? The beating of the heart is not felt, nor do we feel the pulsing of our arteries. The worse for us if we did! But this buzzing, this perpetual ticking we do notice, and I say that all this furious haste is not natural, all this flickering and vanishing of images; but that there lies beneath it a machine which seems to pursue it, frantically screaming.
Will it break down?
Ah, we must not fix our attention upon it too closely. That would arouse in us an ever-increasing fury, an exasperation which finally we could endure no longer; would drive us mad.

On nothing, on nothing at all now, in this dizzy bustle which sweeps down upon us and overwhelms us, ought we to fix our attention. Take in, rather, moment by moment, this rapid passage of aspects and events, and so on, until we reach the point when for each of us the buzz shall cease.

3.

I cannot get out of my mind the man I met a year ago, on the night of my arrival in Rome.
It was in November, a bitterly cold night. I was wandering in search of a modest lodging, not so much for myself, accustomed to spend my nights in the open, on friendly terms with the bats and the stars, as for my portmanteau, which was my sole worldly possession, left behind in the railway cloakroom, when I happened to run into one of my friends from Sassari, of whom I had long lost sight: Simone Pau, a man of singular

originality and freedom from prejudice. Hearing of my hapless plight, he proposed that I should come and sleep that night in his hotel. I accepted the invitation, and we set off on foot through the almost deserted streets. On our way, I told him of my many misadventures and of the frail hopes that had brought me to Rome.

Every now and then Simone Pau raised his hat-less head, on which the long, sleek, grey hair was parted down the middle in flowing locks, but zigzag, the parting being made with his fingers, for want of a comb. These locks, drawn back behind his ears on either side, gave him a curious, scanty, irregular mane. He expelled a large mouthful of smoke, and stood for a while listening to me, with his huge swollen lips held apart, like those of an ancient comic mask. His crafty, mouselike eyes, sharp as needles, seemed to dart to and fro, as though trapped in his big, rugged, massive face, the face of a savage and unsophisticated peasant. I supposed him to have adopted this attitude, with his mouth open, to laugh at me, at my misfortunes and hopes. But, at a certain point in my recital, I saw him stop in the middle of the street lugubriously lighted by its gas lamps, and heard him say aloud in the silence of the night:

“Excuse me, but what do I know about the mountain, the tree, the sea?

The mountain is a mountain because I say: ‘That is a mountain.’ In other words: ‘_I am the mountain_.’ What are we? We are whatever, at any given moment, occupies our attention. I am the mountain, I am the tree, I am the sea. I am also the star, which knows not its own existence!”

I remained speechless. But not for long. I too have, inextricably rooted in the very depths of my being, the same malady as my friend.

A malady which, to my mind, proves in the clearest manner that everything that happens happens probably because the earth was made not so much for mankind as for the animals. Because animals have in themselves by nature only so much as suffices

them and is necessary for them to live in the conditions to which they were, each after its own kind, ordained; whereas men have in them a superfluity which constantly and vainly torments them, never making them satisfied with any conditions, and always leaving them uncertain of their destiny. An inexplicable superfluity, which, to afford itself an outlet, creates in nature an artificial world, a world that has a meaning and value for them alone, and yet one with which they themselves cannot ever be content, so that without pause they keep on frantically arranging and rearranging it, like a thing which, having been fashioned by themselves from a need to extend and relieve an activity of which they can see neither the end nor the reason, increases and complicates ever more and more their torments, carrying them farther from the simple conditions laid down by nature for life on this earth, conditions to which only dumb animals know how to remain faithful and obedient.

My friend Simone Pau is convinced in good faith that he is worth a great deal more than a dumb animal, because the animal does not know and is content always to repeat the same action. I too am convinced that he is of far greater value than an animal, but not for those reasons. Of what benefit is it to a man not to be content with always repeating the same action? Why, those actions that are fundamental and indispensable to life, he too is obliged to perform and to repeat, day after day, like the animals, if he does not wish to die. All the rest, arranged and rearranged continually and frantically, can hardly fail to reveal themselves sooner or later as illusions or vanities, being as they are the fruit of that superfluity, of which we do not see on this earth either the end or the reason. And where did my friend Simone Pau learn that the animal does not know? It knows what is necessary to itself, and does not bother about the rest, because the animal has not in its nature any superfluity. Man, who has a superfluity, and simply because he has it, torments himself with certain problems, destined on earth to remain insoluble. And this is

where his superiority lies! Perhaps this torment is a sign and proof (riot, let us hope, an earnest also) of another life beyond this earth; but, things being as they are upon earth, I feel that I am in the right when I say that it was made more for the animals than for men.
I do not wish to be misunderstood. What I mean is, that on this earth man is destined to fare ill, because he has in him more than is
sufficient for him to fare well, that is to say in peace and contentment. And that it is indeed an excess, _for life on earth_, this element which man has within him (and which makes him a man and not a beast), is proved by the fact that it—this excess—never succeeds in finding rest in anything, nor in deriving contentment from anything here below, so that it seeks and demands elsewhere, beyond the life on earth, the reason and recompense for its torment. So much the worse, then, does man fare, the more he seeks to employ, upon the earth itself, in frantic constructions and complications, his own superfluity.

This I know, I who turn a handle.
As for my friend Simone Pau, the beauty of it is this: that he believes that he has set himself free from all superfluity, reducing all his wants to a minimum, depriving himself of every comfort and living the naked life of a snail. And he does not see that, on the contrary, he, by reducing himself thus, has immersed himself altogether in the superfluity and lives now by nothing else.
That evening, having just come to Rome, I was not yet aware of this. I knew him, I repeat, to be a man of singular originality and freedom from prejudice, but I could never have imagined that his originality and his freedom from prejudice would reach the point that I am about to relate.

4.

Coming to the end of the Corso Vittorio Emanuele, we crossed

the bridge. I remember that I gazed almost with a religious awe at the dark rounded mass of Castel Sant' Angelo, high and solemn under the twinkling of the stars. The great works of human architecture, by night, and the heavenly constellations seem to have a mutual understanding. In the humid chill of that immense nocturnal background, I felt this awe start up, flicker as in a succession of spasms, which were caused in me perhaps by the serpentine reflexions of the lights on the other bridges and on the banks, in the black mysterious water of the river. But Simone Pau tore me from this attitude of admiration, turning first in the direction of Saint Peter's, then dodging aside along the Vicolo del Villano. Uncertain of the way, uncertain of everything, in the empty horror of the deserted streets, full of strange phantoms quivering from the rusty reflectors of the infrequent lamps, at every breath of air, on the walls of the old houses, I thought with terror and disgust of the people that were lying comfortably asleep in those houses and had no idea how their homes appeared from outside to such as wandered homeless through the night, without there being a single house anywhere which they might enter. Now and again, Simone Pau shook his head and tapped his chest with two fingers. Oh, yes! The mountain was he, and the tree, and the sea; but the hotel, where was it? There, in Borgo Pio? Yes, close at hand, in the Vicolo del Falco. I raised my eyes; I saw on the right hand side of that alley a grim building, with a lantern hung out above the door: a big lantern, in which the flame of the gas-jet yawned through the dirty glass. I stopped in front of this door which was standing ajar, and read over the arch:

CASUAL SHELTER
"Do you sleep here?"
"Yes, and feed too. Lovely bowls of soup. In the best of company. Come in: this is my home."
Indeed the old porter and two other men of the night staff of the Shelter, huddled and crouching together round a copper brazier, welcomed him as a regular guest, greeting him with

gestures and in words from their glass cage in the echoing corridor:
“Good evening, Signor Professore.”
Simone Pau warned me, darkly, with great solemnity, that I must not be disappointed, for I should not be able to sleep in this hotel for more than six nights in succession. He explained to me that after every sixth night I should have to spend at least one outside, in the open, in order to start a fresh series.
I, sleep there?
In the presence of those three watchmen, I listened to his explanation with a melancholy smile, which, however, hovered gently over my lips, as though to preserve the buoyancy of my spirits and to keep them from sinking into the shame of this abyss.
Albeit in a wretched plight, with but a few lire in my pocket, I was well dressed, with gloves on my hands, spats on my ankles. I wanted to take the adventure, with this smile, as a whimsical caprice on the part of my strange friend. But Simone Pau was annoyed:
“You don’t take me seriously?”
“No, my dear fellow, indeed I don’t take you seriously.”
“You are right,” said Simone Pau, “serious, do you know who is really serious? The quack doctor with a black coat and no collar, with a big black beard and spectacles, who sends the medium to sleep in the market-place. I am not quite as serious as that yet. You may laugh, friend Serafino.”

And he went on to explain to me that it was all free of charge there. In winter, on the hammocks, a pair of clean sheets, solid and fresh as the sails of a ship, and two thick woollen blankets; in summer, the sheets alone, and a counterpane for anyone who wanted it; also a wrapper and a pair of canvas slippers, washable.
“Remember that, washable!”
“And why?”
“Let me explain. With these slippers and wrapper they give you

a ticket; you go into that dressing-room there—through that door on the right—undress, and hand in your clothes, including your shoes, to be disinfected, which is done in the ovens over there. Then, come over here, look…. Do you see this lovely pond?”
I lowered my eyes and looked.
A pond? It was a chasm, mouldy, narrow and deep, a sort of den to herd swine in, carved out of the living rock, to which one went down by five or six steps, and over which there hung a pungent odour of suds. A tin pipe, pierced with holes that were all yellow with rust, ran above it along the middle from end to end.
“Well?”
“You undress over there; hand in your clothes….”
“… shoes included….”
“… shoes included, to be disinfected, and step down here naked.”
“Naked?”
“Naked, in company with six or seven other nudes. One of our dear friends in the cage there turns on the tap, and you, standing under the pipe, _zifff_…, you get, free for nothing, a most beautiful shower. Then you dry yourself sumptuously with your wrapper, put on your canvas slippers, and steal quietly out in procession with the other draped figures up the stairs; there they are; up there is the dormitory, and so goodnight.”
“Is it compulsory?”
“What? The shower? Ah, because you are wearing gloves and spats, friend Serafino? But you can take them off without shame. Everyone here strips himself of his shame, and offers himself naked to the baptism of this pond! Haven’t you the courage to descend to these nudities?”
There was no need. The shower is obligatory only for unclean mendicants. Simone Pau had never taken it.
In this place he is, really, a schoolmaster. Attached to the shelter there are a soup kitchen and a refuge for homeless children of either sex, beggars’ children, prisoners’

children, children of every form of sin and shame. They are under the care of certain Sisters of Charity, who have managed to set up a little school for them as well. Simone Pau, albeit by profession a bitter enemy of humanity and of every form of teaching, gives lessons with the greatest pleasure to these children, for two hours daily, in the early morning, and the children are extremely grateful to him. He is given, in return, his board and lodging: that is to say a little room, all to himself, clean and neat, and a special service of meals, shared with four other teachers, who are a poor old pensioner of the Papal Government and three spinster schoolmistresses, friends of the Sisters and taken in here by them.
But Simone Pau dispenses with the special meals, since at midday he is never in the Shelter, and it is only in the evenings, when it suits his convenience, that he takes a bowlful or two of soup from the common kitchen; he keeps the little room, but he never uses it,
because he goes and sleeps in the dormitory of the Night Shelter, for the sake of the company to be found there, which he has grown to relish, of queer, vagrant types. Apart from these two hours devoted to teaching, he spends all his time in the libraries and the _caffè_; every now and then, he publishes in some philosophic review an essay which amazes everyone by the bizarre novelty of the views expressed in it, the strangeness of the arguments and the abundance of learning displayed; and he flourishes again for a while.

At the time, I repeat, I was not aware of all this. I supposed, and perhaps it was partly true, that he had brought me there for the pleasure of bewildering me; and since there is no better way of disconcerting a person who is seeking to bewilder one with extravagant paradoxes or with the strangest, most fantastic suggestions than to pretend to accept those paradoxes as though they were the most obvious truisms, and his suggestions as entirely natural and opportune; so I behaved that evening, to disconcert my friend Simone Pau. He,

realising my intention, looked me in the eyes and, seeing them to be completely impassive, exclaimed with a smile: “What an idiot you are!”
He offered me his room; I thought at first that he was joking; but when he assured me that he really had a room there to himself, I would not accept it and went with him to the dormitory of the Shelter. I am not sorry, since, for the discomfort and repulsion that I felt in that odious place, I had two compensations:
First; that of finding the post which I now hold, or rather the opportunity of going as an operator to the great cinematograph company, the Kosmograph;
Secondly; that of meeting the man who has remained for me ever since the symbol of the wretched fate to which continuous progress condemns the human race.
First of all, the man.

5.

Simone Pau pointed him out to me, the following morning, when we rose from our hammocks.
I shall not describe that barrack of a dormitory, foul with the breath of so many men, in the grey light of dawn, nor the exodus of the inmates, as they went downstairs, dishevelled and stupid with sleep, in their long white nightshirts, with their canvas slippers on their feet, and their tickets in their hands, to the dressing-room to recover their clothes.
There was one man among them who, amid the folds of his white wrapper, gripped tightly under his arm a violin, wrapped in a worn, dirty, faded cover of green baize, and went on his way frowning darkly, as though lost in contemplation of the hairs that overhung from his bushy, knitted eyebrows.
“Friend, friend!” Simone Pau called to him. The man came towards us, keeping his head lowered, as though bowed down by the enormous weight of his red, fleshy nose; and seemed to be saying as he advanced:

“Make way! Make way! You see what life can make of a man’s nose?”
Simone Pau went up to him; lovingly with one hand he lifted up the man’s chin; with the other he clapped him on the shoulder, to give him confidence, and repeated:
“My friend!”
Then, turning again to myself:
“Serafino,” he said, “let me introduce to you a great artist. They have labelled him with a shocking nickname; but no matter; he is a
great artist. Gaze upon him: there he is, with his God under his arm! It looks like a broom: it is a violin.”
I turned to observe the effect of Simone Pau’s words on the face of the stranger. Emotionless. And Simone Pau went on:
“A violin, nothing else. And he never parts from it. The attendants here even allow him to take it to bed with him, on the understanding that he does not play it at night and disturb the other inmates. But there is no danger of that. Out with it, my friend, and shew it to this gentleman, who can feel for you.”

The man eyed me at first with misgivings; then, on a further request from Simone Pau, took from its case the old violin, a really priceless instrument, and shewed it to us, as a modest cripple might expose his stump.
Simone Pau went on, turning to me:
“You see? He lets you see it. A great concession, for which you ought to thank him! His father, many years ago, left him in possession of a printing press at Perugia, with all sorts of machines and type and a good connexion. Tell us, my friend, what you did with it, to
consecrate yourself to the service of your God.”
The man stood looking at Simone Pau, as though he had not understood the request.
Simone Pau made it clearer:
“What did you do with it, with your press?”
Thereupon the man waved his hand with a gesture of

contemptuous indifference.
“He neglected it,” Simone Pau explained this gesture. “He neglected it until he had brought himself to the verge of starvation. And then, with his violin under his arm, he came to Rome. He has not played for some time now, because he thinks that he cannot play any longer, after all that has happened to him. But until recently, he used to play in the wine-shops. In the wineshops one drinks; and he would play first, and drink afterwards. He played divinely; the more divinely he played, the more he drank; so that often he was obliged to place his God, his violin, in pawn. And then he would call at some printing press to find work; gradually he would put together what he needed to redeem his violin, and back he would go to play in the wine-shops. But listen to what happened to him once, and has led, you understand, to a slight alteration of his … don’t, for heaven’s sake, let us say his reason, let us say his conception of life. Put it away, my friend, put your instrument away: I know it hurts you if I tell the story while you have your violin uncovered.”

The man nodded several times in the affirmative, gravely, with his towsled head, and wrapped up his violin.
“This is what happened to him,” Simone Pau went on. “He called at a big printing office where there is a foreman who, as a lad, used to work in his press at Perugia. ‘There’s no vacancy; I’m sorry,’ he was told. And my friend was going away, crushed, when he heard himself called back. ‘Wait,’ said the foreman, ‘if you can adapt yourself to it, we might have something for you…. It isn’t the job for you; still, if you are hard up….’ My friend shrugged his shoulders and went with the foreman. He was taken into a special room, all silent; and the foreman shewed him a new machine: a pachyderm, flat, black, squat; a monstrous beast which eats lead and voids books. It is a perfected monotype, with none of the complications of rods and wheels and bands, without the noisy jigging of the fount. I tell you, a regular beast, a pachyderm, quietly chewing away at its long ribbon of

perforated paper. ‘It does everything by itself,’ the foreman said to my friend. ‘You have nothing to do but feed it now and then with its cakes of lead, and keep an eye on it.’ My friend felt his breath fail and his arms sink. To be brought down to such an office as that, a man, an artist! Worse than being a stable-boy. … To keep an eye on that black beast, which did everything by itself, and required no other service of him than to have put in its mouth, from time to time, its food, those leaden cakes! But this is nothing, Serafino!

Crushed, mortified, bowed down with shame and poisoned with spleen, my friend endured a week of this degrading slavery, and, as he handed the monster its leaden cakes, dreamed of his deliverance, his violin, his art; vowed and swore that he would never go back to playing in the wine-shops, where he is so strongly, so irresistibly tempted to drink, and determined to find other places more befitting the exercise of his art, the worship of his deity. Yes, my friends! No sooner had he redeemed the violin than he read in the advertisement columns of a newspaper, among the offers of employment, one from a cinematograph, addressed: such and such a street and number, which required a violin and clarinet for its orchestra. At once my friend hastened to the place; presented himself, joyful, exultant, with his violin under his arm. Well; he found himself face to face with another machine, an automatic pianoforte, what is called a piano player. They said to him: ‘You with your violin have to accompany this instrument!’ Do you understand? A violin, in the hands of a man, accompany a roll of perforated paper running through the belly of this other machine! The soul, which moves and guides the hands of the man, which now passes into the touch of the bow, now trembles in the fingers that press the strings, obliged to follow the register of this automatic instrument! My friend flew into such a towering passion that the police had to be called, and he was arrested and sentenced to a fortnight’s imprisonment for assaulting the forces of law and order.

“He came out again, as you see him.

“He drinks now, and does not play any more.”

6.

All the reflexions that I made at the beginning with regard to my wretched plight, and that of all the others who are condemned like myself to be nothing more than a hand that turns a handle, have as their starting point this man, whom I met on the morning after my arrival in Rome. Certainly I have been in a position to make them, because I too have been reduced to this office of being the servant of a machine; but that came afterwards.

I say this, because this man presented to the reader at this point, after the aforesaid reflexions, might appear to him to be a grotesque invention of my fancy. But let him remember that I should perhaps never have thought of those reflexions, had they not been, partly at least, suggested to me by Simone Pau's introducing the unfortunate creature to me; while, for that matter, the whole of this first adventure of mine is grotesque, and is so because Simone Pau himself is, and means to be, almost by profession, grotesque, as he shewed on that first evening when he chose to take me to a Casual Shelter.

I did not make any reflexion whatsoever at the time; in the first place, because I could never, even in my wildest dreams, have thought that I should be reduced to this occupation; also, because I should have been interrupted by a great hubbub on the stair leading to the dormitory, and by the tumultuous and joyful inrush of all the inmates who had already gone down to the dressing-room to recover their clothes.

What had happened?

They came upstairs again, still swathed in the white wrappers, and with the slippers on their feet.

Among them, together with the attendants and the Sisters of Charity attached to the Shelter and to the soup kitchen, were a number of gentlemen and some ladies, all well dressed and smiling, with an air of curiosity and novelty. Two of these gentlemen were carrying, one a machine, which now I know well, wrapped in a black cover, while the other had under his arm

its knock-kneed tripod. They were actors and operators from a cinematograph company, and had come about a film to take a scene from real life in a Casual Shelter.

The cinematograph company which had sent these actors was the Kosmograph, in which I for the last eight months have held the post of operator; and the stage manager who was in charge of them was Nicola Polacco, or, as they all call him, Cocò Polacco, my playmate and schoolfellow at Naples in my early boyhood. I am indebted to him for my post, and to the fortunate coincidence of my happening to have spent the night with Simone Pau in that Casual Shelter.
But neither, I repeat, did it enter my mind, that morning, that I should ever come down to setting up a photographic camera on its
tripod, as I saw these two gentlemen doing, nor did it occur to Cocò Polacco to suggest such an occupation to me. He, like the good fellow that he is, made no bones about recognising me, whereas I, having at once recognised him, was trying my hardest not to catch his eye in that wretched place, seeing him radiant with Parisian smartness and with the air and in the setting of an invincible leader of men, among all those actors and actresses and all those recruits of poverty, who were beside themselves with joy in their white gowns at this unlooked-for source of profit. He shewed surprise at finding me there, but only because of the early hour, and asked me how I had known that he and his company would be coming that morning to the Shelter for a real life interior. I left him under the illusion that I had turned up there by chance, out of curiosity; I introduced Simone Pau (the man with the violin, in the confusion, had slipped away); and I remained to look on disgusted at the indecent contamination of this grim reality, the full horror of which I had tasted overnight, by the stupid fiction which Polacco had come there to stage.

My disgust, however, I perhaps feel only now. That morning, I must have felt more than anything else curiosity at being

present for the first time at the production of a film. This curiosity, though, was distracted at a certain point in the proceedings by one of the
actresses, who, the moment I caught sight of her, aroused in me another curiosity far more keen.
Nestoroff? Was it possible? It seemed to be she and yet it seemed not to be. That hair of a strange tawny colour, almost coppery, that style of dress, sober, almost stiff, were not hers. But the motion of her slender, exquisite body, with a touch of the feline in the sway of her hips; the head raised high, inclined a little to one side, and that sweet smile on a pair of lips as fresh as a pair of rose-leaves, whenever anyone addressed her; those eyes, unnaturally wide, open, greenish, fixed and at the same time vacant, and cold in the shadow of their long lashes were hers, entirely hers, with that certainty all her own that everyone, whatever she might say or ask, would answer yes.
Varia Nestoroff? Was it possible? Acting for a cinematograph company?

There flashed through my mind Capri, the Russian colony, Naples, all those noisy gatherings of young artists, painters, sculptors, in strange eccentric haunts, full of sunshine and colour, and a house, a dear house in the country, near Sorrento, into which this woman had brought confusion and death.
When, after a second rehearsal of the scene for which the company had come to the Shelter, Cocò Polacco invited me to come and see him at the Kosmograph, I, still in doubt, asked him if this actress was really the Nestoroff.
“Yes, my dear fellow,” he answered with a sigh. “You know her history, perhaps.”
I nodded my head.

“Ah, but you can’t know the rest of it!” Polacco went on. “Come, come and see me at the Kosmograph; I’ll tell you the whole story. Gubbio, I don’t know what I wouldn’t pay to get

that woman off my hands. But, I can tell you, it is easier…"
"Polacco! Polacco!" she called to him at that moment.
And from the haste with which Cocò Polacco obeyed her summons, I fully realised the power that she had with the firm, from which she held a contract as principal with one of the most lavish salaries.
A day or two later I went to the Kosmograph, for no reason except to learn the rest of this woman's story, of which I knew the beginning all too well.

1915/1925 – Shoot!
(The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator)
Introduction
Book I – Book II – Book III – Book IV
Book V – Book VI – Book VII

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