Shoot! – Book II

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In Italiano – Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio, operatore

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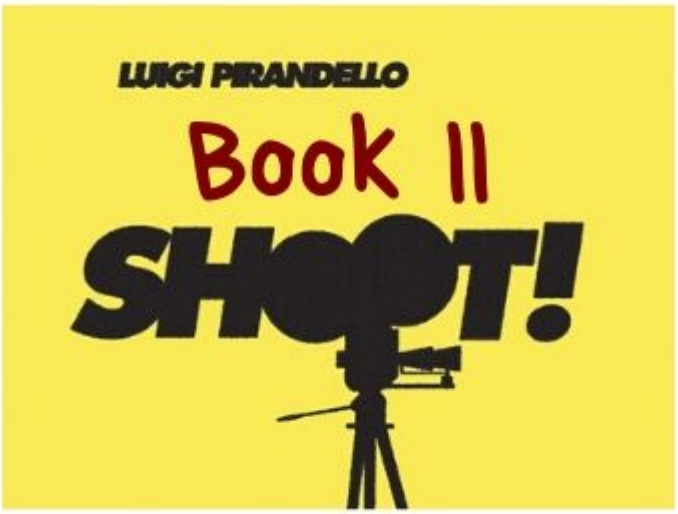

Shoot! – Book II

1.

Dear house in the country, the _Grandparents'_, full of the indescribable fragrance of the oldest family memories, where all the old-fashioned chairs and tables, vitalised by these memories, were no longer inanimate objects but, so to speak, intimate parts of the people who lived in the house, since in them they came in contact with, became aware of the precious, tranquil, safe reality of their existence.
There really did linger in those rooms a peculiar aroma, which I seem to smell now as I write: an aroma of the life of long

ago which seemed to have given a fragrance to all the things that were preserved there.
I see again the drawing-room, a trifle gloomy, it must be admitted, with its walls stuccoed in rectangular panels which strove to imitate ancient marbles: red and green alternately; and each panel was set in a handsome border of its own, of stucco likewise, in a pattern of foliage; except that in the course of time these imitation marbles had grown weary of their innocent make-believe, had bulged out a little here and there, and one saw a few tiny cracks on the surface. All of which said to me kindly:
“You are poor; the seams of your jacket are rent; but you see that even in a gentleman’s house…”
Ah, yes! I had only to turn and look at those curious brackets which seemed to shrink from touching the floor with their gilded spidery legs. The marble top of each was a trifle yellow, and in the sloping mirror above were reflected exactly in their immobility the pair of baskets that stood upon the marble: baskets of fruit, also of marble, coloured: figs, peaches, limes, corresponding exactly, on either side, with their reflexions, as though there were four baskets instead of two.

In that motionless, clear reflexion was embodied all the limpid calm which reigned in that house. It seemed as though nothing could ever happen there. This was the message, also, of the little bronze timepiece between the baskets, only the back of which was to be seen in the mirror. It represented a fountain, and had a spiral rod of rock-crystal, which spun round and round with the movement of the clockwork. How much water had that fountain poured forth? And yet the ttle basin beneath it was never full.
Next I see the room from which one goes down to the garden. (From one room to the other one passes between a pair of low doors, which seem full of their own importance, and perfectly aware of the treasures committed to their charge.) This room, leading down to the garden, is the favourite sitting-room at

all times of the year. It has a floor of large, square tiles of terra-cotta, a trifle worn with use. The wallpaper, patterned with damask roses, is a trifle faded, as are the gauze curtains, also patterned with damask roses, screening the windows and the glass door beyond which one sees the landing of the little wooden outside stair, and the green railing and the pergola of the garden bathed in an enchantment of sunshine and stillness.
The light filters green and fervid between the slats of the little sun-blind outside the window, and does not pour into the room, which
remains in a cool delicious shadow, embalmed with the scents from the garden.

What bliss, what a bath of purity for the soul, to sit at rest for a little upon that old sofa with its high back, its cylindrical cushions of green rep, likewise a trifle discoloured.
“Giorgio! Giorgio!”
Who is calling from the garden? It is Granny Rosa, who cannot succeed in reaching, even with the end of her cane, the flowers of the
jasmine, now that the plant has grown so big and has climbed right up high upon the wall.
Granny Rosa does so love those jasmines! She has upstairs, in the cupboard in the wall of her room, a box full of umbrella-shaped heads of cummin, dried; she takes one out every morning, before she goes down to the garden; and, when she has gathered the blossoms with her cane, she sits down in the shade of the pergola, puts on her spectacles, and slips the jasmines one by one into the spidery stems of that umbrella-shaped head, until she has turned it into a lovely round white rose, with an intense, delicious perfume, which she goes and places religiously in a little vase on the top of the chest of drawers in her room, in front of the portrait of her only son, who died long ago.
It is so intimate and sheltered, this little house, so

contented with the life that it encloses within its walls, without any desire for the other life that goes noisily on outside, far away. It remains there, as though perched in a niche behind the green hill, and has not wished for so much as a glimpse of the sea and the marvellous Bay. It has chosen to remain apart, unknown to all the world, almost hidden away in that green, deserted corner, outside and far away from all the vicissitudes of life.

There was at one time on the gatepost a marble tablet, which bore the name of the owner: _Carlo Mirelli_. Grandfather Carlo decided to remove it, when Death found his way, for the first time, into that modest little house buried in the country, and carried off with him the son of the house, barely thirty years old, already the father himself of two little children.
Did Grandfather Carlo think, perhaps, that when the tablet was removed from the gatepost, Death would not find his way back to the house again?
Grandfather Carlo was one of those old men who wore a velvet cap with a silken tassel, but could read Horace. He knew, therefore, that death, _aequo pede_, knocks at all doors alike, whether or not they have a name engraved on a tablet. Were it not that each of us, blinded by what he considers theinjustice of his own lot, feels an unreasoning need to vent the fury of his own grief upon somebody or something. Grandfather Carlo’s fury, on that occasion, fell upon the innocent tablet on the gatepost.
If Death allowed us to catch hold of him, I would catch him by the arm and lead him in front of that mirror where with such limpid precision are reflected in their immobility the two baskets of fruit and the back of the bronze timepiece, and would say to him:
“You see? Now be off with you! Everything here must be allowed to remain as it is!”
But Death does not allow us to catch hold of him.
By taking down that tablet, perhaps Grandfather Carlo meant to imply that—once his son was dead—there was nobody left alive

in the house.
A little later, Death came again.

There was one person left alive who called upon him desperately every night: the widowed daughter-in-law who, after her husband's death, felt as though she were divided from the family, a stranger in the house.
And so, the two little orphans: Lidia, the elder, who was nearly five, and Giorgetto who was three, remained in the sole charge of their grandparents, who were still not so very old.
To start life afresh when one is already beginning to grow feeble, and to rediscover in oneself all the first amazements of childhood; to create once again round a pair of rosy children the most innocent affection, the most pleasant dreams, and to drive away, as being importunate and tiresome, Experience, who from time to time thrusts in her head, the face of a withered old woman, to say, blinking behind her spectacles: "This will happen, that will happen," when as yet nothing has ever happened, and it is so delightful that nothing should have happened; and to act and think and speak as though really one knew nothing more than is already known to two little children who know nothing at all: to act as though things were seen not in retrospect but through the eyes of a person going forwards for the first time, and for the first time seeing and hearing: this miracle was performed by Grandfather Carlo and Granny Rosa; they did, that is to say, for the two little ones, far more than would have been done by the father and mother, who, if they had lived, young as they both were, might have wished to enjoy life a little longer themselves. Nor did their not having anything left to enjoy render the task more easy for the two old people, for we know that to the old everything is a heavy burden, when it no longer has any meaning or value for them.

The two grandparents accepted the meaning and value which their twograndchildren gradually, as they grew older, began to give to things, and all the world took on the bright colours

of youth for them, and life recaptured the candour and freshness of innocence. But what could they know of a world so wide, of a life so different from their own, which was going on outside, far away, those two young creatures born and brought up in the house in the country? The old people had forgotten that life and that world, everything had become new again for them, the sky, the scenery, the song of the birds, the taste of food. Outside the gate, life existed no longer. Life began there, at the gate, and gilded afresh everything round about; nor did the old people imagine that anything could come to them from outside; and even Death, even Death they had almost forgotten, albeit he had already come there twice.

Have patience a little while, Death, to whom no house, however remote and hidden, can remain unknown! But how in the world, starting from thousands and thousands of miles away, thrust aside, or dragged, tossed hither and thither by the turmoil of ever so many mysterious changes of fortune, could there have found her way to that modest little house, perched in its niche there behind the green hill, a woman, to whom the peace and the affection that reigned there not only must have been incomprehensible, must have been not even conceivable?

I have no record, nor perhaps has anyone, of the path followed by this woman to bring her to the dear house in the country, near Sorrento.

There, at that very spot, before the gatepost, from which Grandfather Carlo, long ago, had had the tablet removed, she did not arrive of her own accord; that is certain; she did not raise her hand, uninvited, to ring the bell, to make them open the gate to her. But not far from there she stopped to wait for a young man, guarded until then with the life and soul of two old grandparents, handsome, innocent, ardent, his soul borne on the wings of dreams, to come out of that gate and advance confidently towards life.

Oh, Granny Rosa, do you still call to him from the garden, for him to pull down with your cane your jasmine blossoms?

“Giorgio! Giorgio!”
There still rings in my ears, Granny Rosa, the sound of your voice. And I feel a bitter delight, which I cannot express in words, inimagining you as still there, in your little house, which I see again as though I were there at this moment, and were at this moment breathing the atmosphere that lingers there of an old-fashioned existence; in imagining you as knowing nothing of all that has happened, as you were at first, when I, in the summer holidays, came out from Sorrento every morning to prepare for the October examinations your grandson Giorgio, who refused to learn a word of Latin or Greek, and instead covered every scrap of paper that came into his hands, the margins of his books, the top of the schoolroom table, with sketches in pen and pencil, with caricatures. There must even be one of me, still, on the top of that table, covered all over with scribblings.

“Ah, Signor Serafino,” you sigh, Granny Rosa, as you hand me in an old cup the familiar coffee with essence of cinnamon, like the coffee that our aunts in religion offer us in their convents, “ah, Signor Serafino, Giorgio has bought a box of paints; he wants to leave us; he wants to become a painter…”
And over your shoulder opens her sweet, clear, sky-blue eyes and blushes a deep red Lidiuccia, your granddaughter; Duccella, as you call her. Why?
Ah, because…. There has come now three times from Naples a young gentleman, a fine young gentleman all covered with scent, in a velvet coat, with yellow chamois-leather gloves, an eyeglass in his right eye and a baron’s coronet on his handkerchief and portfolio. He was sent by his grandfather, Barone Nuti, a friend of Grandfather Carlo, who was like a brother to him before Grandfather Carlo, growing weary of the world, retired from Naples, here, to the Sorrentine villa. Youknow this, Granny Rosa. But you do not know that the young gentleman from Naples is fervently encouraging Giorgio to devote himself to art and to go off to Naples with him. Duccella knows, because young Aldo Nuti (how very strange!),

when speaking with such fervour of art,never looks at Giorgio, but looks at her, into her eyes, as though it were her that he had to encourage, and not Giorgio; yes, yes, her, tocome to Naples to stay there for ever with himself.
So that is why Duccella blushes a deep red, over your shoulder, Granny Rosa, whenever she hears you say that Giorgio wishes to become a painter.
He too, the young gentleman from Naples, if his grandfather would allow him… Not a painter, no… He would like to go upon the stage, to become an actor. How he would love that! But his grandfather does not wish it…. Dare we wager, Granny Rosa, that Duccella does not wish it either?

2.

Of the sequel to this simple, innocent, idyllic life, about four years later, I have a cursory knowledge.
I acted as tutor to Giorgio Mirelli, but I was myself a student also, a penniless student who had grown old while waiting to complete his studies, and whom the sacrifices borne by his parents to keep him at school had automatically inspired with the utmost zeal, the utmost diligence, a shy, painful humility, a constraint which never diminished, albeit this period of waiting had now extended over many, many years.
Yet my time had perhaps not been wasted. I studied by myself and meditated, in those years of waiting, far more and with infinitely greater profit than I had done in my years at school; and I taught myself Latin and Greek, in an attempt to pass from the technical side, in which I had started, to the classical, in the hope that it might be easier for me to enter the University by that road.
Certainly this kind of study was far better suited to my intelligence.
I buried myself in it with a passion so intense and vital that when, at six-and-twenty, through an unexpected, tiny legacy from an uncle in holy orders (who had died in Apulia, and

whose existence had long been almost forgotten by my family), I was finally able to enter the University, I remained for long in doubt whether it would not be better for me to leave behind in the drawer, where it had slumbered undisturbed for all those years, my qualifying diploma from the technical institute, and to procure another from the liceo, so as to matriculate in the faculty of philosophy and literature. Family counsels prevailed, and I set off for Liege, where, with this worm of philosophy gnawing my brain, I acquired an intimate and painful knowledge of all the machines invented by man for his own happiness.
I have derived one great benefit from it, as you can see. I have learned to draw back with an instinctive shudder from reality, as others see and handle it, without however managing to arrest a reality of my own, since my distracted, wandering sentiments never succeed in giving any value or meaning to this uncertain, loveless life of mine. I look now at everything, myself included, as from a distance; and from nothing does there ever come to me a loving signal, beckoning me to approach it with confidence or with the hope of deriving some comfort from it. Pitying signals, yes, I seem to catch in the eyes of many people, in the aspect of many places which impel me not to receive comfort nor to give it, since he that cannot receive it cannot give it; but pity. Pity, ah yes… But I know that pity is such a difficult thing either to give or to receive.

For some years after my return to Naples I found nothing to do; I led a dissolute life with a group of young artists, until the last remains of that modest legacy had gone. I owe to chance, as I have said, and to the friendship of one of my old school friends the post that I now occupy. I fill it-yes, we may say so-honourably, and I am well rewarded for my labour. Oh, they all respect me, here, as a first rate operator: alert, accurate, and _perfectly impassive_. If I ought to be grateful to Polacco, Polacco ought in turn to be grateful to me for the credit that he has acquired with

Commendator Borgalli, the Chairman and General Manager of the Kosmograph, for the acquisition that the firm has made of an operator like myself. Signor Gubbio is not, properly speaking, attached to any of the four companies among which the production is distributed, but is summoned here and there, from one to another, to take the longest and most difficult films.

Signor Gubbio does far more work than the firm's other five operators; but for every film that proves a success he receives a handsome commission and frequent bonuses. I ought to be happy and contented. Instead of which I think with longing of my lean years of youthful folly at Naples among the young artists.

Immediately after my return from Liége, I met Giorgio Mirelli, who had been at Naples for two years. He had recently shown at an exhibition two strange pictures, which had given rise among the critics and the general public to long and violent discussions. He still retained the innocence and fervour of sixteen; he had no eyes to see the neglected state of his clothes, his towsled locks, the first few hairs that were sprouting in long curls on his chin and hollow cheeks, like the cheeks of a sick man: and sick he was of a divine malady; a prey to a continual anxiety, which made him neither observe nor feel what was for others the reality of life; always on the point of dashing off in response to some mysterious, distant summons, which he alone could hear.

I asked after his people. He told me that Grandfather Carlo had died a short time since. I gazed at him surprised at the way in which he gave me this news; he seemed not to have felt any sorrow at his grandfather's death. But, called back by the look in my eyes to his own grief, he said: "Poor grandfather…" so sadly and with such a smile that at once I changed my mind and realised that he, in the tumult of all the life that seethed round about him, had neither the power nor the time to think of his grief.

And Granny Rosa? Granny Rosa was keeping well… yes, quite

well,…
as well as she could, poor old soul, after such a bereavement. Two heads of cummin, now, to be filled with jasmine, every morning, one for the recently dead, the other for him who had died long ago.
And Duccella, Duccella?
Ah, how her brother's eyes smiled at my question!
"Rosy! Rosy!"
And he told me that for the last year she had been engaged to the young Barone Aldo Nuti. The wedding would soon be celebrated; it had been postponed owing to the death of Grandfather Carlo.
But he shewed no sign of joy at this wedding; indeed he told me that he did not regard Aldo Nuti as a suitable match for Duccella; and, waving both his hands in the air with outstretched fingers, he broke out in that exclamation of disgust which he was in the habit of using when I endeavoured to make him understand the rules and terminations of the second declension in Greek:
"He's so complicated! He's so complicated!"
It was never possible to keep him still after that exclamation.
And as he used to escape then from the schoolroom table, so now he escaped from me again. I lost sight of him for more than a year. I
learned from his fellow-artists that he had gone to Capri, to paint.
There he met Varia Nestoroff.

3.

I know this woman well now, as well, that is to say, as it is possible to know her, and I can now explain many things that long remained incomprehensible to me. Though there is still the risk that the explanation I now offer myself of them may perhaps appear incomprehensible to others. But I offer it to

myself and not to others; and I have not the slightest intention of offering it as an
excuse for the Nestoroff.
To whom should I excuse her?
I keep away from people who are respectable by profession, as from the plague.
It seems impossible that a person should not enjoy his own wickedness when he practises it with a cold-blooded calculation. But if such unhappiness (and it must be tremendous) exists, I mean that of not being able to enjoy one's own wickedness, our contempt for such wicked persons, as for all sorts of other unhappiness, may perhaps be conquered, or at least modified, by a certain pity. I speak, so as not to give offence, as a moderately respectable person. But we must, surely to goodness, admit this fact: that we are all, more or less, wicked; but that we do not enjoy our wickedness, and are unhappy.
Is it possible?
We all of us readily admit our own unhappiness; no one admits his own wickedness; and the former we insist upon regarding as due to no reason or fault of our own; whereas we labour to find a hundred reasons, a hundred excuses and justifications for every trifling act of wickedness that we have committed, whether against other people or against our own conscience.
Would you like me to shew you how we at once rebel, and indignantly deny a wicked action, even when it is undeniable, and when we have undeniably enjoyed it?

The following two incidents have occurred. (This is not a digression, for the Nestoroff has been compared by someone to the beautiful tiger purchased, a few days ago, by the Kosmograph.) The following two incidents, I say, have occurred.
A flock of birds of passage—woodcock and snipe—have alighted to rest for a little after their long flight and to recuperate their strength in the Roman Campagna. They have chosen a bad spot. A snipe, more daring than the rest, says to his

comrades:
“You remain here, hidden in this brake. I shall go and explore the country round, and, if I find a better place, I shall call you.”
An engineer friend of yours, of an adventurous spirit, a Fellow of the Geographical Society, has undertaken the mission of going to Africa, I do not exactly know (because you yourself do not know exactly) upon what scientific exploration. He is still a long way from his goal; you have had some news of him; his last letter has left you somewhat alarmed, because in it your friend explained to you the dangers which he was going to face, when he prepared to cross certain distant tracts, savage and deserted.
To-day is Sunday. You rise betimes to go out shooting. You have made all your preparations overnight, promising yourself a great enjoyment. You alight from the train, blithe and happy; off you go over the fresh, green Campagna, a trifle misty still, in search of a good place for the birds of passage. You wait there for half an hour, for an hour; you begin to feel bored and take from your pocket the newspaper you bought when you started, at the station. After a time, you hear what sounds like a flutter of wings in the dense foliage of the wood; you lay down the paper; you go creeping quietly up; you take aim; you fire. Oh, joy! A snipe!
Yes, indeed, a snipe. The very snipe, the explorer, that had left its comrades in the brake.
I know that you do not eat the birds you have shot; you make presents of them to your friends: for you everything consists in this, in the pleasure of killing what you call game.

The day does not promise well. But you, like all sportsmen, are inclined to be superstitious: you believe that reading the newspaper has brought you luck, and you go back to read the newspaper in the place where you left it. On the second page you find the news that your friend the engineer, who went to Africa on behalf of the Geographical Society, while crossing those savage and deserted tracts, has met a tragic end:

attacked, torn in pieces and devoured by a wild beast.
As you read with a shudder the account in the newspaper, it never enters your head even remotely to draw any comparison between the wild beast that has killed your friend and yourself, who have killed the snipe, an explorer like him.
And yet such a comparison would be perfectly logical, and, I fear, would give a certain advantage to the beast, since you have killed for pleasure, and without any risk of your being killed yourself; whereas the beast has killed from hunger, that is to say from necessity, and with the risk of being killed by your friend, who must certainly have been armed.
Rhetoric, you say? Ah, yes, my friend; do not be too contemptuous; I admit as much, myself; rhetoric, because we, by the grace of God, are men and not snipe.
The snipe, for his part, without any fear of being rhetorical, might draw the comparison and demand that at least men, who go out shooting for pleasure, should not call the beasts savage.
We, no. We cannot allow the comparison, because on one side we have a man who has killed a beast, and on the other a beast that has killed a man.

At the very utmost, my dear snipe, to make some concession to you, we can say that you were a poor innocent little creature. There! Does that satisfy you? But you are not to infer from this, that our wickedness is therefore the greater; and, above all, you are not to say that, by calling you an innocent little creature and killing you, we have forfeited the right to call the beast savage which, from hunger and not for pleasure, has killed a man.
But when a man, you say, makes himself lower than a beast?
Ah, yes; we must be prepared, certainly, for the consequences of our logic. Often we make a slip, and then heaven only knows where we shall land.

4.

The experience of seeing men sink lower than the beasts must

frequently have occurred to Varia Nestoroff.
And yet she has not killed them. A huntress, as you are a hunter. The snipe, you have killed. She has never killed anyone. One only, for her sake, has killed himself, by his own hand: Giorgio Mirelli; but not for her sake alone.
The beast, moreover, which does harm from a necessity of its nature, is not, so far as we know, unhappy.
The Nestoroff, as we have abundant grounds for supposing, is most unhappy. She does not enjoy her own wickedness, for all that it is
carried out with such cold-blooded calculation.
If I were to say openly what I think of her to my fellow-operators, to the actors and actresses of the firm, all of them would at once
suspect that I too had fallen in love with the Nestoroff.
I ignore this suspicion.

The Nestoroff feels for me, like all her fellow-artists, an almost instinctive aversion. I do not reciprocate it in any way because I do
not spend my time with her, except when I am in the service o my machine, and then, as I turn the handle, I am what I am supposed to be, that is to say perfectly _impassive_. I am unable either to hate or to love the Nestoroff, as I am unable either to hate or to love anyone. I am _a hand that turns the handle_. When, finally, I am restored to myself, that is to say when for me the torture of being only a hand is ended, and I can regain possession of the rest of my body, and marvel that I have still a head on my shoulders, and abandon myself once more to that wretched _superfluity_ which exists in me nevertheless and of which for almost the whole day my profession condemns me to be deprived; then… ah, then the affections, the memories that come to life in me are certainly not such as can persuade me to love this woman. I was the friend of Giorgio Mirelli, and among the most cherished memories of my life is that of the dear house in the country by Sorrento, where Granny Rosa and poor Duccella still live

and mourn.
I study. I go on studying, because that is perhaps my ruling passion: it nourished in times of poverty and sustained my dreams, and it is the sole comfort that I have left, now that they have ended so miserably.
I study this woman, then, without passion but intently, who, albeit she may seem to understand what she is doing and why she does it, yet has not in herself any of that quiet "systematisation" of concepts, affections, rights and duties, opinions and habits, which I abominate in other people.
She knows nothing for certain, except the harm that she can do to others, and she does it, I repeat, with cold-blooded calculation.
This, in the opinion of other people, of all the "systematised," debars her from any excuse. But I believe that she cannot offer any excuse, herself, for the harm which nevertheless she knows herself to have done.

She has something in her, this woman, which the others do not succeed in understanding, because even she herself does not clearly understand it. One guesses it, however, from the violent expressions which she assumes, involuntarily, unconsciously, in the parts that are assigned to her.
She alone takes them seriously, and all the more so the more illogical and extravagant they are, grotesquely heroic and contradictory. And there is no way of keeping her in check, of making her moderate the violence of those expressions. She alone ruins more films than all the other actors in the four companies put together. For one thing, she always moves out of the picture; when by any chance she does not move out, her action is so disordered, her face so strangely altered and disguised, that in the rehearsal theatre almost all the scenes in which she has taken part turn out useless and have to be done again.
Any other actress, who had not enjoyed and did not enjoy, as she does, the favour of the warm-hearted Commendator Borgalli, would long sincehave been given notice to leave.

Instead of which, “Dear, dear, dear…” exclaims the warm-hearted Commendatore, without the least annoyance, when he sees projected on the screen in the rehearsal theatre those demoniacal pictures, “dear, dear, dear… oh, come … no… is it possible? Oh, Lord, how horrible … cut it out, cut it out….”
And he finds fault with Polacco, and with all the producers in general, who keep the _scenarios_ to themselves, confining themselves to suggesting bit by bit to the actors the action to be performed in each separate scene, often disjointedly, because not all the scenes can be taken in order, one after another, in a studio. It often happens that the actors do not even know what part they are supposed to be taking in the play as a whole, and one hears some actor ask in the middle:
“I say, Polacco, am I the husband or the lover?”
In vain does Polacco protest that he has carefully explained the whole part to the Nestoroff. Commendator Borgalli knows that the fault does not lie with Polacco; so much so, that he has given him another leading lady, the Sgrelli, in order not to waste all the films that are allotted to his company. But the Nestoroff protests on her own account, if Polacco makes use of the Sgrelli alone, or of the Sgrelli more than of herself, the true leading lady of the company. Her ill-wishers say that she does this to ruin Polacco, and Polacco himself believes it and goes about saying so. It is untrue: the only thing ruined, here, is film; and the Nestoroff is genuinely in despair at what she has done; I repeat, involuntarily and unconsciously. She herself remains speechless and almost terror-stricken at her own image on the screen, so altered and disordered. She sees there some one who is herself but whom she does not know. She would like not to recognise herself in this person, but at least to know her.

Possibly for years and years, through all the mysterious adventures of her life, she has gone in quest of this demon which exists in her and always escapes her, to arrest it, to ask it what it wants, why it is suffering, what she ought to do to soothe it, to placate it, to give it peace.

No one, whose eyes are not clouded by a passionate antipathy, and who has seen her come out of the rehearsal theatre after the presentation of those pictures of herself, can retain any doubt as to that. She is really tragic: terrified and enthralled, with that sombre stupor in her eyes which we observe in the eyes of the dying, and can barely restrain the convulsive tremor of her entire person.
I know the answer I should receive, were I to point this out to anyone:
“But it is rage! She is quivering with rage!”
It is rage, yes; but not the sort of rage that they all suppose, namely at a film that has gone wrong. A cold rage, colder than a blade of steel, is indeed this woman’s weapon against all her enemies. Now Cocò Polacco is not an enemy in her eyes. If he were, she would not tremble like that: with the utmost coldness she would avenge herself on him.
Enemies, to her, all the men become to whom she attaches herself, in order that they may help her to arrest the secret thing in her that escapes her: she herself, yes, but a thing that lives and suffers, so to speak, _outside herself_.
Well, no one has ever taken any notice of this thing, which to her is more pressing than anything else; everyone, rather, remains dazzled by her exquisite form, and does not wish to possess or to know anything else of her. And then she punishes them with a cold rage, just where their desires prick them; and first of all she exasperates those desires with the most perfidious art, that her revenge may be all the greater. She avenges herself by flinging her body, suddenly and coldly, at those whom they least expected to see thus favoured: like that, so as to shew them in what contempt she holds the thing that they prize most of all in her.

I do not believe that there can be any other explanation of certain sudden changes in her amorous relations, which appear to everyone, at first sight, inexplicable, because no one can deny that she has done harm to herself by them.
Except that the others, thinking it over and considering, on

the one hand the nature of the men with whom she had consorted previously, and on the other that of the men at whom she has suddenly flung herself, say that this is due to the fact that with the former sort she could not remain, _could not breathe_; whereas to the latter she felt herself attracted by a “gutter” affinity; and this sudden and unexpected flinging of herself they explain as the sudden spring of a person who, after a long suffocation, seeks to obtain at last, _wherever he can_, a mouthful of air.

And if it should be just the opposite? If _in order to breathe_, to secure that help of which I have already spoken, she had attached herself to the former sort, and instead of having the _breathing-space_, the help for which she hoped, had found no breathing-space and no help from them, but rather an anger and disgust all the stronger because increased and embittered by disappointment, and also by a certain contempt which a person feels for the needs of another’s soul who sees and cares for nothing but his own SOUL, like that, in capital letters? No one knows; but of these “gutter” refinements those may well be capable who mostly highly esteem themselves, and are deemed _superior_ by their fellows. And then… then, better the gutter which offers itself as such, which, if it makes you sad, does not delude you; and which may have, as often it does have, a good side to it, and, now and then, certain traces of innocence, which cheer and refresh you all the more, the less you expected to find them there.

The fact remains that, for more than a year, the Nestoroff has been living with the Sicilian actor Carlo Ferro, who also is engaged by the Kosmograph: she is dominated by him and passionately in love with him. She knows what she may expect from such a man, and asks for nothing more. But it seems that she obtains far more from him than the others are capable of imagining.

This explains why, for some time back, I have set myself to study, with keen interest, Carlo Ferro also.

5.

A problem which I find it far more difficult to solve is this: how in the world Giorgio Mirelli, who would fly with such impatience from every complication, can have lost himself to this woman, to the point of laying down his life on her account.

Almost all the details are lacking that would enable me to solve thisproblem, and I have said already that I have no more than a summary report of the drama.

I know from various sources that the Nestoroff, at Capri, when Giorgio Mirelli saw her for the first time, was in distinctly bad odour, and was treated with great diffidence by the little Russian colony, which for some years past has been settled upon that island.

Some even suspected her of being a spy, perhaps because she, not very prudently, had introduced herself as the widow of an old conspirator, who had died some years before her coming to Capri, a refugee in Berlin. It appears that some one wrote for information, both to Berlin and to Petersburg, with regard to her and to this unknown conspirator, and that it came to light that a certain Nikolai Nestoroff had indeed been for some years in exile in Berlin, and had died there, but without ever having given anyone to understand that he was exiled for political reasons. It appears to have become known also that this Nikolai Nestoroff had taken her, as a little girl, from the streets, in one of the poorest and most disreputable quarters of Petersburg, and, after having her educated, had married her; and then, reduced by his vices to the verge of starvation had lived upon her, sending her out to sing in music-halls of the lowest order, until, with the police on his track, he had made his escape, alone, into Germany. But the Nestoroff, to my knowledge, indignantly denies all these stories.

That she may have complained privately to some one of the ill-treatment, not to say the cruelty she received from her

girlhood at the hands of this old man is quite possible; but she does not say that he lived upon her; she says rather that, of her own accord, obeying the call of her passion, and also, perhaps, to supply the necessities of life, having overcome his opposition, she took to acting in the provinces, a-c-t-i-n-g, mind, on the legitimate stage; and that then, her husband having fled from Russia for political
reasons and settled in Berlin, she, knowing him to be in frail health and in need of attention, taking pity on him, had joined him there and remained with him till his death. What she did then, in Berlin, as a widow, and afterwards in Paris and Vienna, cities to which she often refers, shewing a thorough knowledge of their life and customs, she neither says herself nor certainly does anyone ever venture to ask her.

For certain people, for innumerable people, I should say, who are incapable of seeing anything but themselves, love of humanity often, if not always, means nothing more than being pleased with themselves.
Thoroughly pleased with himself, with his art, with his studies of landscape, must Giorgio Mirelli, unquestionably, have been in those days at Capri.
Indeed—and I seem to have said this before—his habitual state of mind was one of rapture and amazement. Given such a state of mind, it is easy to imagine that this woman did not appear to him as she really was, with the needs that she felt, wounded, scourged, poisoned by the distrust and evil gossip that surrounded her; but in the fantastic transfiguration that he at once made of her, and illuminated by the light in which he beheld her. For him feelings must take the form of colours, and, perhaps, entirely engrossed in his art, he had no other feeling left save for colour. All the impressions that he formed of her were derived exclusively, perhaps, from the light which he shed upon her; impressions, therefore, that were felt by him alone. She need not, perhaps could not participate in them. Now, nothing irritates us more than to be shut out from an enjoyment, vividly present before our

eyes, round about us, the reason of which we can neither discover nor guess. But even if Giorgio Mirelli had told her of his enjoyment, he could not have conveyed it to her mind. It was a joy felt by him alone, and proved that he too, in his heart, prayed and wished for nothing else of her than her body; not, it is true, like other men, with base intent; but even this, in the long run—if you think it over carefully—could not but increase the woman's irritation. Because, if the failure to derive any assistance, in the maddening uncertainties of her spirit, from the many who saw and desired nothing in her save her body, to satisfy on it the brutal appetite of the senses, filled her with anger and disgust; her anger with the one man, who also desired her body and nothing more; her body, but only to extract from it an ideal and absolutely self-sufficient pleasure, must have been all the stronger, in so far as every provocative of disgust was entirely lacking, and must have rendered more difficult, if not absolutely futile, the vengeance which she was in the habit of wreaking upon other people. An angel, to a woman, is always more irritating than a beast.

I know from all Giorgio Mirelli's artist friends in Naples that he wasspotlessly chaste, not because he did not know how to make an impression upon women, but because he instinctively avoided every vulgar distraction.
To account for his suicide, which beyond question was largely due to the Nestoroff, we ought to assume that she, not cared for, not helped, and irritated to madness, in order to be avenged, must with the finest and subtlest art have contrived that her body should gradually come to life before his eyes, not for the delight of his eyes alone; and that, when she saw him, like all the rest, conquered and enslaved, she forbade him, the better to taste her revenge, to take any other pleasure from her than that with which, until then, he had been content, as the only one desired, because the only one worthy of him.
We ought, I say, to assume this, but only if we wish to be

ill-natured. The Nestoroff might say, and perhaps does say, that she did nothing to alter that relation of pure friendship which had grown up between herself and Mirelli; so much so that when he, no longer contented with that pure friendship, more impetuous than ever owing to the severe repulse with which she met his advances, yet, to obtain his purpose, offered to marry her, she struggled for a long time—and this is true; I learned it on good authority—to dissuade him, and proposed to leave Capri, to disappear; and in the end remained there only because of his acute despair.

But it is true that, if we wish to be ill-natured, we may also be of opinion that both the early repulse and the later struggle and threat and attempt to leave the island, to disappear, were perhaps so many artifices carefully planned and put into practice to reduce this young man to despair after having seduced him, and to obtain from him all sorts of things which otherwise he would never, perhaps, have conceded to her. Foremost among them, that she should be introduced as his future bride at the Villa by Sorrento to that dear Granny, to that sweet little sister, of whom he had spoken to her, and to the sister's betrothed.

It seems that he, Aldo Nuti, more than, the two women, resolutely opposed this claim. Authority and power to oppose and to prevent this marriage he did not possess, for Giorgio was now his own master, free to act as he chose, and considered that he need no longer give an account of himself to anyone; but that he should bring this woman to the house and place her in contact with his sister, and expect the latter to welcome her and to treat her as a sister, this, by Jove, he could and must oppose, and oppose it he did with all his strength. But were they, Granny Rosa and Duccella, aware what sort of woman this was that Giorgio proposed to bring to the house and to marry? A Russian adventuress, an actress, if not something worse! How could he allow such a thing, how not oppose it with all his strength?

Again "with all his strength"… Ah, yes, who knows how hard

Granny Rosa and Duccella had to fight in order to overcome, little by little, by their sweet and gentle persuasion, all the strength of Aldo Nuti. How could they have imagined what was to become of that strength at the sight of Varia Nestoroff, as soon as she set foot, timid, ethereal and smiling, in the dear villa by Sorrento!

Perhaps Giorgio, to account for the delay which Granny Rosa and Duccella shewed in answering, may have said to the Nestoroff that this delay was due to the opposition "with all his strength" of his sister's future husband; so that the Nestoroff felt the temptation to measure her own strength against this other, at once, as soon as she set foot in the villa. I know nothing! I know that Aldo Nuti was drawn in as though into a whirlpool and at once carried away like a wisp of straw by passion for this woman.

I do not know him. I saw him as a boy, once only, when I was acting as Giorgio's tutor, and he struck me as a fool. This impression of mine does not agree with what Mirelli said to me about him, on my return from Liege, namely that he was _complicated_. Nor does what I have heard from other people, with regard to him correspond in the least with this first impression, which however has irresistibly led me to speak of him according to the idea that I had formed of him from it. I must, really, have been mistaken. Duccella found it possible to love him! And this, to my mind, does more than anything else to prove me in the wrong. But we cannot control our impressions. He may be, as people tell me, a serious young man, albeit of a most ardent temperament; for me, until I see him again, he will remain that fool of a boy, with the baron's coronet on his handkerchiefs and portfolios, the young gentleman who _would so love to become an actor_.

He became one, and not by way of make-believe, with the Nestoroff, at Giorgio Mirelli's expense. The drama was unfolded at Naples, shortly after the Nestoroff's introduction and brief visit to the house at Sorrento. It seems that Nuti returned to Naples with the engaged couple, after that brief visit, to help the inexperienced Giorgio and her who was not

yet familiar with the town, to set their house in order before the wedding.

Perhaps the drama would not have happened, or would have had a different ending, had it not been for the complication of Duccella's engagement to, or rather her love for Nuti. For this reason Giorgio Mirelli was obliged to concentrate on himself the violence of the unendurable horror that overcame him at the sudden discovery of his betrayal.
Aldo Nuti rushed from Naples like a madman before there arrived from Sorrento at the news of Giorgio's suicide Granny Rosa and Duccella.
Poor Duccella, poor Granny Rosa! The woman who from thousands and thousands of miles away came to bring confusion and death into your little house where with the jasmines bloomed the most innocent of idylls, I have her here, now, in front of my machine, every day; and, if the news I have heard from Polacco be true, I shall presently have him here as well, Aldo Nuti, who appears to have heard that the Nestoroff is leading lady with the Kosmograph.
I do not know why, my heart tells me that, as I turn the handle of this photographic machine, I am destined to carry out both your revenge and your poor Giorgio's, dear Duccella, dear Granny Rosa!

1915/1925 – Shoot!
(The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator)
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