Shoot! – Book IV

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In Italiano – Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio, operatore

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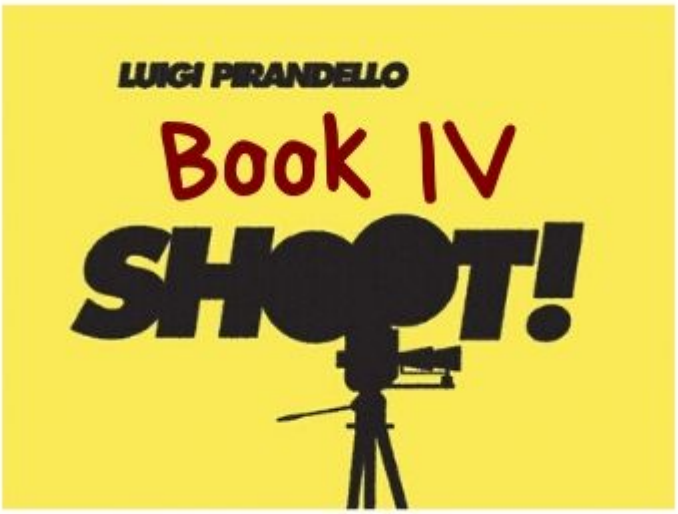

Shoot! – Book IV

1.

I have no longer the slightest doubt about it: she is aware of my friendship with Giorgio Mirelli, and knows that Aldo Nuti is coming
here shortly.
Both these pieces of information have come to her, obviously, through Carlo Ferro.
But how is it that nobody here takes the trouble to remember what has happened between the two, and why have they not at once cancelled their arrangement with Nuti? To help on this

arrangement a great deal of work has been done, behind the scenes, by Cocò Polacco, a friend of Nuti, on whom Nuti has been relying from the first. It appears that Polacco has obtained from one of the young men who parade here as "amateurs," one Fleccia, the sale at a high premium of the ten shares which this young man held in the company. For some days, indeed, Fleccia has gone about saying that he is bored with life in Rome and is going to Paris.
We know that the majority of these young men hang about here, more than for any other reason, because of the friendly relations they have formed, or hope to form, with some young actress; and that many of them leave when they have not succeeded in forming such relations, or have grown tired of them. Friendly relations, we say: fortunately, words cannot blush.
This is what happens: a young actress, dressed as a _divette_ or a _ballerina_, goes running about stripped to the waist, on the stage or lawn; she stops here and there to talk, with her bosom offered to every eye; very well, the young man who is her friend follows after her with a powder-box and puff in his hand, and every now and then powders her shoulders, her arms, her neck, her throat, proud that such a duty should fall to his lot. How many times, since I joined the Kosmograph, have I seen Gigetto Fleccia run like this after the little Sgrelli? But now he, for about a month, has been out of favour with her. He has served his apprenticeship: he is going to Paris. It cannot, therefore, come as a surprise to anyone that Nuti, a rich gentleman also, and an amateur actor, should be coming to take his place. It is perhaps not sufficiently known, or else people have already forgotten the drama of his former adventure with the Nestoroff.

But I am often such an innocent creature! Who remembers anything a year after it has happened? Have we time now to consider, in a town, among all the turmoil of life, that anything—a man, a work, an event—deserves to be remembered for a year? You, in the solitude of the country, Duccella and

Granny Bosa, you can remember! Here, even if anyone does remember, well, was there a drama? There are ever so many, and for none of them does this turmoil of life pause for a moment. It does not appear to be a matter in which other people, from outside, ought to interfere, to prevent the consequences of a renewal.
What consequences? A meeting with Carlo Ferro? But he is so hated by everyone, that fellow, not only for his ill manners, but precisely because he is the Nestoroff's lover! Should this meeting come about, and give rise to any disturbance, it will be for the outsiders one spectacle the more to enjoy: and as for those whose duty it is to see that no disorder does arise, they hope perhaps to find in it an excuse for getting rid of both Carlo Ferro and the Nestoroff, who, if she is loyally protected by Commendator Borgalli, is a perfect nuisance to everyone else. Or, is it perhaps hoped that the Nestoroff herself, to escape from Nuti, will resign of her own accord?

Certainly Polacco has toiled with such energy to make Nuti come here for this reason alone; and from the very first, secretly, has intended that Nuti should be strengthened, against any influence that Commendator Borgalli might bring to bear, by the acquisition, at a high price, of the shares held by Gigetto Fleccia, with the right to take his place, as well, in the parts assigned to him.
What reason, then, have all these people to be so alarmed about the spirit in which Nuti will arrive? They anticipate, if anything, only the shock of meeting with Carlo Ferro, because Carlo Ferro is here, before their eyes; they see him, they can touch him; and they do not imagine that there can be any other connecting link between the Nestoroff and Nuti.
"You?" they would ask me, were I to begin to speak to them of such matters.
I, my friends? Ah, you will have your joke. One whom you do not see; one whom you cannot touch; a spectre, as in the story-books.

As soon as one of them tries to approach the other, this spectre is bound to rise up between them. Immediately after the suicide, it rose; and made them fly from one another with horror. A splendid cinematographic effect, to you! But not to Aldo Nuti. How in the world can he, now, propose and attempt to approach this woman again? It is not possible that he, of all people, can have forgotten the spectre. But he must have heard that the Nestoroff is here with another man.
And this other man gives him of course, now, the courage to approach her again. Perhaps he hopes that this man, with the solidity of his body, will hide that spectre, will prevent him from seeing it, engaging him in a _tangible_ struggle, in a struggle, that is, not
with a spectre, but of man with man. And perhaps also he will pretend to think that he is coming to engage in this struggle for _his_ sake, to avenge _him_. For obviously the Nestoroff, in calling this other man to her side, has shewn that she has forgotten the “poor victim.”

It is not so. The Nestoroff has not forgotten him. This I have seen clearly written in her eyes, in the way in which she has looked at me for the last two days, that is since Carlo Ferro, acting upon information received, must have let her know that I was a friend of
Giorgio Mirelli.
Irritation, or rather contempt, an unmistakable aversion: that is what I have observed for the last two days in the eyes of the Nestoroff, whenever, for a moment or two, they have rested upon myself. And I am glad of it. Because I am now certain that everything that I have imagined and assumed with regard to her, in studying her, is correct, and corresponds to the reality, as though she herself, in a sincere effusion of all her most secret feelings, had opened to me her wounded and tortured soul.
For the last two days she has displayed in my presence a devoted and submissive affection for Ferro; she clings to him, hangs on him, albeit she lets it be seen by anyone who

observes her closely that she, like everyone else, more than anyone else, knows and sees the mental limitations, the coarse manners, in short the bestial nature of the man. She knows and sees it. But do not the rest of us—intelligent and well-mannered—despise and avoid him? Well, she values him and attaches herself to him for that very reason; precisely because he is neither intelligent nor well-mannered.

A better proof of this I could not have. And yet, apart from this arrogant disdain, something else must be stirring at this moment in
her heart! Certainly, she is planning something. Certainly, Carlo Ferro is nothing more to her than a strong, bitter medicine to which, setting her teeth, making an enormous effort to control herself, she has submitted in order to cure a desperate malady in herself. And now, more than ever, she is holding fast to this medicine, seeing in a flash the peril, with Nuti's coming, of a relapse into her malady. Not, I think, because Aldo Nuti has any great power over her.
Impulsively, like a doll, that other time, she took him up, broke him, flung him from her. But his coming, now, has no other object, surely, than to take her, to tear her from her medicine, setting before her once again the spectre of Giorgio Mirelli, in which she perhaps sees her malady embodied: the maddening torment of her strange spirit, which none of the men to whom she has attached herself has understood, or has cared to take any interest in it.
She does not wish to suffer any more from her malady; she wishes to be cured of it at all costs. She knows that, if Carlo Ferro clasps her in his arms, there is a risk of her being crushed. And this fear pleases her.

"But what good will it do you"—I would like to shout at her—"what good will it do you if Aldo Nuti does not come to bring it back before
you, your malady, when you have it still inside you, stifled by an effort but not conquered! You do not wish to see your

own soul? Is
that possible! It follows you, it follows you always, it pursues you like a mad thing! To escape from it, you cling for refuge, take shelter in the arms of a man whom you know to be without a soul and capable of killing you, if your own soul, by any chance, to-day or to-morrow, takes command of you afresh, to renew the old torment within you! Ah, is it better to be killed? Is it better to be killed than to fall back into that torment, to feel a soul within you, a soul that suffers and does not know why?”

Well, this morning, as I turned the handle of my machine, I suddenly conceived the terrible suspicion that she—playing her part, as usual, like a mad creature—wished to kill herself: yes, really to kill herself, before my eyes. I do not know how I managed to preserve my impassivity; to say to myself:

“You are a hand; go on turning! She is looking at you, looking at you fixedly, looking only at you, to make you understand something; but you know nothing, you are not to understand anything; keep on turning!”

They have begun to stage the film of the tiger, which is to be immensely long, and in which all four companies will take part. I shall not make the slightest effort to find the clue to that tangled skein of vulgar, idiotic scenes. I know that the Nestoroff will not be taking part in it, having failed to secure the principal part for herself. Only this morning, as a special concession to Bertini, she posed for a brief scene of local colour, in a subordinate but by no means easy part, as a young Indian woman, savage and fanatical, who kills herself in the course of the “dagger dance.”

The ground having been marked out on the lawn, Bertini arranged a score of supers in a semicircle, disguised as Indian savages. The Nestoroff came forward almost completely naked, with nothing but a striped loincloth, yellow, green, red and blue. But the marvellous nudity of her firm, slender, shapely body was so to speak draped in the contemptuous indifference to its charms with which she presented herself in

the midst of all those men, her head held high, her arms lowered with a pair of razor-keen daggers, one in each hand.

Bertini explained the action briefly:
“She dances. It is a sort of rite. All the rest stand round watching reverently. Suddenly, at a shout from me, in the middle of the dance, she plunges both daggers into her breast and falls to the ground. The crowd run up and stand over her, registering terror and dismay. Pay attention, there, all of you! You there, do you follow me? First of all you stand and look serious, watching her; as soon as the lady falls, you all run up. Pay attention now, keep in the picture!”
The Nestoroff, advancing to the chord of the semicircle brandishing the pair of daggers, began to gaze at me with so keen and hard a stare that I, behind my big black spider crouching on its tripod, felt my eyes waver and my sight grow dim. For a wonder I managed to obey Bertini’s order:
“Shoot!”

And I set to work, like an automaton, to turn my handle.

Through the painful contortions of that strange, morbid dance, behind the sinister gleam of the daggers, she did not take her eyes for a minute from mine, which followed her movements, fascinated. I saw the sweat on her heaving bosom make furrows in the ochreous paint with which she was “daubed all over. Without giving a thought to her nudity, she dashed about the ground as in a frenzy, panted for breath, and softly, in a gasping whisper, still with her eyes fixed on mine, asked now and again:
“_Bien comme ça? Bien comme ça_?”
As though she wished to be told by me; and her eyes were the eyes of a madwoman. Certainly, they could read in mine, apart from wonder, a dismay that hovered on the verge of terror in the tension of waiting for Bertini to shout. When the shout came, and she pointed both daggers at her bosom and fell to the ground, I really had for a moment the impression that she had stabbed herself, and was for running to the rescue myself,

leaving my handle, when Bertini in a fury called up the supers:
“You there, good God! Get round her! Take your cue! Like that… that will do… Stop!”
I was utterly exhausted; my hand had become a lump of lead, which went on, of its own accord, mechanically, turning the handle.

I saw Carlo Ferro run forward scowling, full of rage and tenderness, with a long purple cloak, help the woman to rise, wrap her in the cloak and lead her off, almost carrying her, to her dressing-room.
I looked at the machine, and found in my throat a curious somnolent voice in which to announce to Bertini:
“Seventy-two feet.”

2

We were waiting to-day, beneath the pergola of the tavern, for the arrival of a certain “young lady of good family,” recommended by Bertini, who was to take a small part in a film which has been left for some months unfinished and which they now wish to complete.
More than an hour had passed since a boy had been sent on a bicycle to this young lady’s house, and still there was no sign of anyone, not even of the boy returning.
Polacco was sitting with me at one table, the Nestoroff and Carlo Ferro were at another. All four of us, with the young lady we were
expecting, were to go in a motor-car for a “nature scene” in the Bosco Sacro.
The sultry afternoon heat, the nuisance of the myriad flies of the tavern, the enforced silence among us four, obliged to remain together notwithstanding the openly declared and for that matter obvious aversion felt by the other two for Polacco and also for myself, increased the strain of waiting until it became quite intolerable.

The Nestoroff was obstinately restraining herself from turning her eyes in our direction. But she was certainly aware that I was looking at her, covertly, while apparently paying her no attention; and more than once she had shewn signs of annoyance. Carlo Ferro had noticed this and had knitted his brows, keeping a close watch on her; and then she had pretended for his benefit to be annoyed, not indeed by myself who was looking at her, but by the sun which, through the vine leaves of the pergola, was beating upon her face. It was true; and a wonderful sight was the play, on that face, of the purple shadows, straying and shot with threads of golden sunlight, which lighted up now one of her nostrils, and part of her upper lip, now the lobe of her ear and a patch of her throat.

I find myself assailed, at times, with such violence by the external aspects of things that the clear, outstanding sharpness of my perceptions almost terrifies me. It becomes so much a part of myself, what I see with so sharp a perception, that I am powerless to conceive how in the world a given object—thing or person—can be other than what I would have it be. The Nestoroff's aversion, in that moment of such intensely lucid perception, was intolerable to me. How in the world did she not understand that I was not her enemy?

Suddenly, after peering out for a little through the trellis, she rose, and we saw her stroll out, towards a hired carriage, which also had been standing there for an hour outside the entrance to the Kosmograph, waiting under the blazing sun. I too had noticed the carriage; but the foliage of the vine prevented me from seeing who was waiting in it. It had been waiting there for so long that I could not believe that there was anybody in it. Polacco rose; I rose also, and we looked out.

A young girl, dressed in a sky-blue frock, of Swiss material, very light, with a straw hat, trimmed with black velvet ribbons, sat waiting in the carriage. Holding in her lap an aged dog with a shaggy coat, black and white, she was timidly

and anxiously watching the taximeter of the carriage, which every now and then gave a click, and must already be indicating a considerable sum. The Nestoroff went up to her with great civility and invited her to come inside, to escape from the rays of the sun. Would it not be better to wait beneath the pergola of the tavern?
“Plenty of flies, of course. But at any rate one can sit in the shade.”
The shaggy dog had begun to growl at the Nestoroff, baring its teeth in defence of its young mistress. She, turning suddenly crimson, perhaps at the unexpected pleasure of seeing this beautiful lady shew an interest in her with such courtesy; perhaps also from the annoyance that her stupid old pet was causing her, which received the other’s cordial invitation in so unfriendly a spirit, thanked her, accepted the invitation with some confusion, and stepped down from the carriage with the dog under her arm. I had the impression that she left the carriage chiefly to make amends for the old dog’s hostile reception of the lady. And indeed she slapped it hard on the muzzle with her hand, calling out:
“Be quiet, Piccini!”

And then, turning to the Nestoroff:
“I apologise for her, she doesn’t understand. …”
And they came in together beneath the pergola. I studied the old dog which was angrily looking its young mistress up and down, with the eyes of a human being. It seemed to be saying to her: “And what do _you_ understand?”
Polacco, in the mean time, had advanced towards her and was asking politely:
“Signorina Luisetta?”
She turned a deep crimson, as though lost in a painful surprise, at being recognised by some one whom she did not know; smiled; nodded her head in the affirmative, and all the black ribbons on her straw hat nodded with her.
Polacco went on to ask her:
“Is Papa here?”

Yes, once more, with her head, as though amid her blushes and confusion she could not find words with which to answer. At length, with an effort, she found a timid utterance:
“He went inside some time ago: he said that he would have finished his business at once, and now…”
She raised her eyes to look at the Nestoroff and smiled at her, as though she were sorry that this gentleman with his questions had distracted her attention from the lady, who had been so kind to her without even knowing who she was. Polacco thereupon introduced them:
“Signorina Luisetta Cavalena; Signora Nestoroff.”
He then turned and beckoned to Carlo Ferro, who at once sprang to his feet and bowed awkwardly.

“Carlo Ferro, the actor.”
Last of all, he introduced me:
“Gubbio.”
It seemed to me that, among the lot of us, I was the one who frightened her least.
I knew by repute Cavalena, her father, notorious at the Kosmograph by the nickname of _Suicide_. It seems that the poor man is terribly oppressed by a jealous wife. Owing to his wife’s jealousy he has been obliged to renounce first of all a commission in the Militia, as Surgeon Lieutenant, and one good practice after another; then, his independent work, as well, and journalism, in which he had found an opening, and finally teaching also, to which he had turned in desperation, in the technical schools, as a lecturer on physics and natural history. Now, not being able (still on account of his wife) to devote himself to the drama, for which he has for some time past believed himself to have a distinct talent, he has turned to the composition of scenarios for the cinematograph, with great loathing, _obtorto collo_, in order to supply the wants of his family, since they are unable to live exclusively upon his wife’s fortune, and what little they make by letting a pair of furnished rooms. Unfortunately, in the hell of his home life, having now grown accustomed to viewing the world as

a prison, it seems that, however hard he may try, he can never succeed in composing a plot for a film without dragging in, somewhere or other, a suicide. Which accounts for Polacco's having steadily, up to the present, rejected all his scenarios, in view of the fact that the English decline, absolutely, to hear of a suicide in their films.

"Has he come to see me?" Polacco asked Signorina Luisetta.
Signorina Luisetta stammered in confusion:
"No," she said… "I don't think so; Bertini, I think it was."
"Ah, the rascal! He has gone to Bertini, has he? But tell me, Signorina, did he go in alone?"
Fresh, and still more vivid blushes on the part of Signorina Luisetta.

"With Mamma."
Polacco threw up his hands and waved them in the air, pulling a long face and winking.
"Let us hope that nothing dreadful is going to happen!"
Signorina Luisetta made an effort to smile; and echoed:
"Let us hope so…"
And it hurt me so to see her smile like that, with her little face aflame! I would have liked to shout at Polacco:
"Stop tormenting her with these questions! Can't you see that you are making her utterly miserable?"
But Polacco, all of a sudden, had an idea; he clapped his hands:
"Why shouldn't we take Signorina Luisetta? By Jove, yes; we have been waiting here for the last hour! Why yes, of course. My dear young lady, you will be helping us out of a difficulty, and you will see that we shall give you plenty of fun. It will all be over in half an hour. I shall tell the porter, as soon as your father and mother come out, to let them know that you have gone for half an hour with me and this lady and gentleman. I am such a friend of your father that I can venture to take the liberty. I shall give you a little part to play, you will like that?"

Signorina Luisetta had evidently a great fear of appearing timid, embarrassed, foolish; and, as for coming with us, said: “Why not?”
But, when it came to acting, she could not, she did not know how… and in those clothes, too—really? … she had never tried… she
felt ashamed… besides…
Polacco explained to her that nothing serious was required: she would not have to open her mouth, nor to mount a stage, nor to appear before the public. Nothing at all. It would be in the country. Among the trees. “Without a word spoken.
“You will be sitting on a bench, beside this gentleman,” he pointed to Ferro. “This gentleman will pretend to be making love to you. You, naturally, do not believe him, and laugh at him. … Like that…. Splendid! You laugh and shake your head, plucking the petals off a flower. All of a sudden, a motor-car dashes up. This gentleman starts to his feet, frowns, looks round him, scenting danger in the air. You stop plucking at the flower and adopt an attitude of doubt, dismay. Suddenly this lady,” here he pointed to the Nestoroff, “jumps down from the car, takes a revolver from her muff and fires at you…”
Signorina Luisetta opened her eyes wide and stared at the Nestoroff, in terror.
“In make-believe! Don’t be frightened!” Polacco went on with a smile.

“The gentleman runs forward, disarms the lady; meanwhile you have sunk down, first of all, on the bench, mortally wounded; from the bench you fall to the ground—without hurting yourself, please! and it is all over…. Come, come, don’t let us waste any more time! We can rehearse the scene on the spot; you will see, it will go off splendidly … and what a fine present you will get afterwards from the Kosmograph!”
“But if Papa…”
“We shall leave a message for him!”
“And Piccini?”
“We can take her with us; I shall carry her myself…. You will

see, the Kosmograph will give Piccini a fine present too….
Come along, let us be off!”

As we got into the motor-car (again, I am certain, so as not to appear timid and foolish), she, who had not given me a second thought, looked at me doubtfully.
Why was I coming too! What part was I to play?
No one had uttered a word to me; I had been barely introduced, named as a dog might be; I had not opened my mouth; I remained silent….
I noticed that my silent presence, the necessity for which she failed to see, but which impressed her, nevertheless, as being mysteriously necessary, was beginning to disturb her. No one thought of offering her any explanation; I could not offer her one myself. I had seemed to her _a person like the rest_; or rather, at first sight, a person _more akin to herself_ than the rest. Now she was beginning to be aware that for these other people and also for herself (in a vague way) I was not, properly speaking, a person. She began to feel that my person was not necessary; but that my presence there had the necessity of a _thing_, which she as yet did not understand; and that I remained silent for that reason. They might speak, yes, they, all four of them—because they were people, each of them represented a person, his or her own; but I, no: I was a thing: why, perhaps the thing that was resting on my knees, wrapped in a black cloth.
And yet I too had a mouth to speak with, eyes to see with, and the said eyes, look, were shining as they rested on her; and certainly
within myself I felt…
Oh, Signorina Luisetta, if you only knew the joy that his own feelings were affording the person—_not necessary_ as such, but as a thing—who sat opposite to you! Did it occur to you that I—albeit seated in front of you like that, like a thing—was capable of feeling within myself? Perhaps. But what I was feeling, behind my mask of impassivity, that you certainly could not imagine.

Feelings that were _not necessary_, Signorina Luisetta! You do not know what they are, nor do you know the intoxicating joy that they can give! This machine here, for instance: does it seem to you that there can be any necessity for it to feel? There cannot be! If it could feel, what feelings would it have? Not necessary feelings, surely.
Something that was a luxury for it. Fantastic things….
Well, among the four of you, to-day, I—a pair of legs, a lap, and on it a machine—I felt _fantastically_.
You, Signorina Luisetta, were, with everything round about you, contained in my feelings, which rejoiced in your innocence, in the pleasure that you derived from the breeze in your face, the view of the open country, the proximity of the beautiful lady. Does it seem strange to you that you entered like that, with everything round about you, into my feelings? But may not a beggar by the roadside perhaps see the road and all the people who go past, comprised in that feeling of pity which he seeks to arouse? You, being more sensitive than the rest, as you pass, notice that you enter into his feeling, and stop and give him the charity of a copper. Many others do not enter in, and it does not occur to the beggar that they are outside his feeling, inside another of their own, in which he too is included as a shadowy nuisance; the beggar thinks that they are hard-hearted. What was I to you in your feelings, Signorina Luisetta î A mysterious man? Yes, you are quite right. Mysterious. If you knew how I feel, at certain moments, my _inanimate silence_! And I revel in the mystery that is exhaled by this silence for such as are capable of remarking it. I should like never to speak at all; to receive everyone and everything in this silence of mine, every tear, every smile; not to provide, myself, an echo to the smile; I could not; not to wipe away, myself, the tear; I should not know how; but so that all might find in me, not only for their griefs, but also and even more for their joys, a tender pity that would make us brothers if only for a moment.

I am so grateful for the good that you have done with the

freshness of your timid, smiling innocence, to the lady who was sitting by your side! So at times, when the rain does not come, parched plants find refreshment in a breath of air. And this breath of air you yourself were, for a moment, in the burning desert of the feelings of that woman who sat beside you; a burning desert that does not know the refreshing coolness of tears.
At one point she, looking at you almost with a frightened admiration, took your hand in her own and stroked it. Who knows what bitter envy of you was torturing her heart at that moment?
Did you see how, immediately afterwards, her face darkened?
A cloud had passed…. What cloud?

3.

A parenthesis. Yes, another. The things that I am obliged to do all day long, I do not speak of them; the beastlinesses that I have to serve up all day long as food for this black spider on its tripod, which eats and is never filled, I do not speak of them; beastlinesses incarnate in these actors and actresses, in all the people who are driven by necessity to feed this machine upon their own modesty, their own dignity, I do not speak of them; I must, all the same, have a little breathing-space, now and again, absolutely, draw a mouthful of air for my superfluity; or die. I am interested in the history of this woman, the Nestoroff I mean; I have filled with it many pages of these notes; but I do not, for all that, intend to be carried away by her history; I intend her, the lady, to remain in front of my machine, or rather I intend myself to remain in front of her what I am to her, an operator, and nothing more.
When my friend Simone Pau has failed for some days in succession to pay me a visit at the Kosmograph, I go myself in the evening to visit him in Borgo Pio, at his Falcon Hostelry. The reason why, for some days, he has not come to see me, is

the saddest imaginable. The man with the violin is dying.
I found keeping watch in the room set apart for Pau in the Shelter, Pa'u himself, his aged colleague, the pensioner of the Papal Government, and the three old spinster schoolmistresses, friends of the Sisters of Charity. On Simone Pau's bed, with an ice-pack on his head, lay the man with the violin, struck down three evenings ago by an apoplectic stroke.
"He is freeing himself," Simone Pau said to me, with a wave of his hand, by way of comfort. "Sit down here, Serafino. Science has placed on his head that cap of ice, which is completely useless. We are helping him to pass away amid serene philosophic discussions, in return for the precious gift which he leaves as an heirloom to us: his violin. Sit down, man, sit here. They have washed him thoroughly, all over; they have put him in order with the sacraments; they have anointed him. Now we are waiting for the end, which cannot be far distant. You remember when he played before the tiger? It made him ill. But perhaps it is better so: he is gaining his freedom!"
How genially the old man smiled at these words, sitting there so clean and neat, with his cap on his head and the bone snuff-box in his hand with the portrait of the Holy Father on the lid!

"Continue," Simone Pau went on, turning to the old man, "continue, Signor Cesarino, your panegyric of the three-wicked oil-lamps,
please."
"Panegyric indeed!" exclaimed Signor Cesarino. "You insist that I am making a panegyric of them! I tell you that they belong to that generation, that is all."
"And is not that a panegyric!"
"Why, no; I say that it all comes to the same thing in the end: it is an idea of mine: so many things I used to see in the dark with those lamps, which, you are perhaps unable to see by electric light; but then, on the other hand, you see

other things with these lights here which I fail to see; because four generations of lights, four, my dear Professor, oil, paraffin, gas and electricity, in the course of sixty years, eh… eh… eh… it's too much, you know? and it's bad for our eyesight, and for our heads too; yes, it's bad for the head too, it is."

The three old maids, who were sitting, all three of them, with their hands, in thread mittens, quietly folded in their laps, shewed their approval by nodding silently with their heads: yes, yes, yes.

"Light, a fine light, I don't say it isn't! Eh, but I know it is," sighed the old man, "I can remember when you went about with a lantern in your hand, so as not to break your neck. But light for outside, that's what it is…. Does it help us to see better indoors? No."

The three quiet old maids, still keeping their hands, in their thread mittens, folded in their laps, agreed in silence, with their heads:

no, no, no.

The old man rose and offered those pure and peaceful hands the reward of a pinch of snuff. Simone Pau held out two fingers.

"You too?" the old man asked him.

"I too, I too," answered Simone Pau, slightly irritated by the question. "And you too, Serafino. Take it, I tell you! Don't you see that it is a rite?"

The little old man, with the pinch between his fingers, shut one eye wickedly:

"Contraband tobacco," he said softly. "It comes from over there…."

And with the thumb of his other hand he made a furtive sign, as though to say: "Saint Peter's, Vatican."

"You understand?" Simone Pau turned to me, thrusting his pinch out before my eyes. "It sets you free from Italy! Does that seem to you nothing? You snuff it, and you no longer smell the stench of the Kingdom!"

"Come, come, do not say that…" the little old man pleaded in distress, for he wished to enjoy in peace the benefits of

toleration,
by tolerating others.
“It is I who say it, not you,” replied Simone Pau. “I say it, who have a right to say it. If you said it, I should ask you not to say it in my presence, is that all right? But you are a wise man, Signor Cesarino! Go on, go on, please, describing to us, with your courtly, old-fashioned grace, the good old oil-lamps, with three wicks, of days gone by… I saw one, do you know, in Beethoven’s house, at Bonn on the Rhine, when I was travelling in Germany. There, this evening we must recall the memory of all the good old things, round this poor violin, shattered by an automatic piano. I confess that I am not over pleased to see my friend in the room here, at such a moment. Yes, you, Serafino. My friend, ladies and gentlemen—let me introduce him to you: Serafino Gubbio—is an operator: poor fellow, he turns the handle of a cinematograph machine.”

“Ah,” said the little old man, with a note of pleasure.
And the three old maids gazed at me in admiration.
“You see?” Simone Pau said to me. “You spoil everything with your presence here. I wager that you now, Signor Cesarino, and you too, ladies, have a burning desire to learn from my friend how the machine works, and how a film is made. But for pity’s sake!”
And he pointed to the dying man, who was breathing heavily in a profound coma under the ice-pack.
“You know that I…” I attempted to put in, quietly.
“I know!” he interrupted me. “You do not enter into your profession, but that does not mean, my dear fellow, that your profession does not enter into you! Try to disabuse these colleagues of mine of the idea that I am a professor. I am the Professor, for them: a trifle eccentric, but still a professor! We may easily fail to recognise ourselves in what we do, but what we do, my dear fellow, remains done: an action which circumscribes you, my dear fellow, gives you a form of sorts, and imprisons you in it. Do you seek to rebel? You cannot. In the first place, we are not free to do as we wish:

the age we live in, the habits of other people, our means, the conditions of our existence, ever so many other reasons, outside and inside us, compel us often to do what we do not wish; and then, the spirit is not detached from the flesh; and the flesh, however closely you guard it, has a will of its own. And what is our intelligence worth, if it does not feel compassion for the beast that is within us? I do not say excuse it. The intelligence that excuses the beast, bestialises itself as well. But to feel pity for it is another matter! Christ preached it; am I not right, Signor Cesarino? So you are the prisoner of what you have done, of the form that your actions have given you.
Duties, responsibilities, a chain of consequences, coils, tentacles which are wound about you, and do not leave you room to breathe. You must do nothing more, or as little as possible, like me, so as to remain as free as possible? Ah, yes! Life itself is an action! When your father brought you into the world, my dear fellow, the deed was done. You can never free yourself again until you end by dying. And not even after your death, Signor Cesarino here will tell you, eh? He never frees himself again, eh? Not even after death. Keep calm, my dear fellow. You will go on turning the handle of your machine even beyond the grave! But yes, yes, because it is not for your being, for which you are not to blame, but for your actions and the consequences of your actions that you have to answer, am I not right, Signor Cesarino?"

"Quite right, yes; but it is not a sin, Professor, to turn the handle of a cinematograph machine," Signor Cesarino observed.
"Not a sin? You ask him!" said Pau.
The little old man and the three old maids gazed at me stupefied and dismayed to see me assent with a nod of my head, smiling, to Simone Pau's verdict.
I smiled because I was picturing myself in the presence of the Creator, in the presence of the Angels and of the blessed souls in Paradise standing behind my great black spider on its knock-kneed tripod, condemned to turn the handle, in the next

world also, after my death.
“Why, of course,” sighed the little old man, “when the cinematograph represents certain indecencies, certain stupid scenes….”
The three old maids, with lowered eyes, made a sign of outraged modesty with their hands.
“But this gentleman would not be responsible for it,” Signor Cesarino hastened to add, courteous and still friendly.
There came from the staircase a sound of sweeping garments and of the heavy beads of a rosary with a dangling crucifix. There appeared, under the broad white wings of her coif, a Sister of Charity. Who had sent for her? The fact remains that, as soon as she appeared on the threshold, the dying man ceased to breathe. And she was quite ready to perform the last duties. She lifted the ice-pack from his head; turned to look at us, in silence, with a simple, rapid movement of her eyes towards the ceiling; then stooped to arrange the deathbed and fell on her knees. The three old maids and Signor Cesarino followed her example. Simone Pau summoned me from the room.
“Count,” he bade me, as we began to go downstairs, pointing to the steps. “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. The steps of a stair; of this stair, which ends in this dark passage…. The hands that hewed them, and placed them here, one upon another….
Dead. The hands that erected this building…. Dead. Like other hands, which erected all the other houses in this quarter…. Rome; what do you think of it? A great city…. Think of this little earth in the firmament…. Do you see? What is it?… A man has died…. Myself, yourself … no matter: a man…. And five people, in there, have gone on their knees round him to pray to some one, to something, which they believe to be outside and over everything and everyone, and not in themselves, a sentiment of theirs which rises independent of their judgment and invokes that same pity which they hope to receive themselves, and it brings them comfort and peace. Well, people must act like that. You and I, who cannot act thus, are a pair of fools.

Because, in saying these stupid things that I am now saying, we are doing the same thing, on our feet, uncomfortably, with only this result for our trouble, that we derive from it neither comfort nor peace. And fools like us are all those who seek God within themselves and despise Him without, who fail, that is to say, to see the value of the actions, of all the actions, even the most worthless, which man has performed since the world began, always the same, however different they may appear. Different, forsooth? Different because we credit them with another value, which, in any event, is arbitrary. We know nothing for certain. And there is nothing to be known beyond that which, in one way or another, is represented outwardly, in actions.
Within is torment and weariness. Go, go and turn your handle, Serafino! Be assured that yours is a profession to be envied! And do
not regard as more stupid than any others the actions that are arranged before your eyes, to be taken by your machine. They are all stupid in the same way, always: life is all a mass of stupidity, always, because it never comes to an end and can never come to an end.
Go, my dear fellow, go and turn your handle, and leave me to go and sleep with the wisdom which, by always sleeping, dogs shew us. Good night."

I came away from the Shelter, comforted. Philosophy is like religion: it is always comforting, even when it is a philosophy of despair, because it is born of the need to overcome a torment, and even when it does not overcome it, the action of setting that torment before our eyes is already a relief, inasmuch as, for a while at least, we no longer feel it within us. The comfort I derived from Simone Pau's words had come to me, however, principally from what he had said with regard to my profession.
Enviable, yes, perhaps; but if it were applied to the recording, without any stupid invention or imaginary construction of scenes and actions, of life, life as it comes,

without selection and without any plan; the actions of life as they are performed without a thought, when people are alive and do not know that a machine is lurking in concealment to surprise them. Who knows how ridiculous they would appear to us! Most of all, ourselves. We should not recognise ourselves, at first; we should exclaim, shocked, mortified, indignant:
“What? I, like that? I, that person? Do I walk like that? Do I laugh like that? Is that my action? My face?” Ah, no, my friend, not you:
your haste, your wish to do this or that, your impatience, your frenzy, your anger, your joy, your grief…. How can you know, you who have them within you, in what manner all these things are represented outwardly? A man who is alive, when he is alive, does not see himself: he lives…. To see how one lived would indeed be a ridiculous spectacle!
Ah, if my profession were destined to this end only! If it had the sole object of presenting to men the ridiculous spectacle of their heedless actions, an immediate view of their passions, of their life as it is. Of this life without rest, which never comes to an end.

4.

“Signor Gubbio, please: I have something to say to you.”
Night had fallen: I was hurrying along beneath the big planes of theavenue. I knew that he—Carlo Ferro—was following me, in breathless haste, so as to pass me and then perhaps to turn round, pretending tohave remembered all of a sudden that he had something to say to me. Iwished to deprive him of this pleasure, and kept increasing my pace, expecting at every moment that he—growing tired at length—wouldadmit himself beaten and call out to me. As indeed he did…. I turned, as though in surprise. He overtook me and with ill-concealedannoyance asked:
“Do you mind!”
“Go on.”

“Are you going home?”
“Yes.”
“Do you live far off?”
“Some way.”
“I have something to say to you,” he repeated, and stood still, looking at me with an evil glint in his eye. “You probably know that, thank God, I can spit on the contract I have with the Kosmograph. I can secure another, just as good and better, at any moment, whenever I choose, anywhere, for myself and my lady friend. Do you know that or don’t you?”
I smiled, shrugging my shoulders:
“I can believe it, if it gives you any pleasure.”
“You can believe it, because it is the truth!” he shouted back at me, in a provocative, challenging tone.
I continued to smile; and said:
“It may be; but I do not see why you come and tell me about it, and in that tone.”
“This is why,” he went on. “I intend to remain, my dear Sir, with the Kosmograph.”
“Remain? Why; I never even knew that you had any idea of leaving.”
“Some one else had the idea,” Carlo Ferro retorted, laying stress on the words _some one else_. “But I tell you that I intend to remain: do you understand?”
“I understand.”
“And I remain, not because I care about the contract, which doesn’t matter a damn to me; but because I have never yet run away fromanyone!”
So saying, he took the lapel of my coat between his fingers, and gave it a tug.
“Do you mind?” it was now my turn to ask, calmly, as I removed his hand; and I felt in my pocket for a box of matches; I struck one of them to light the cigarette which I had already taken from my case and held between my lips; I drew in a mouthful or two of smoke; stood fora while with the burning match in my fingers to let him see that his words, his threatening tone, his aggressive manner, were not causingme

the slightest uneasiness; then I went on, quietly: “I may possibly understand to what you wish to allude; but, I repeat, I do not understand why you come and say these things to me,”
“It is not true,” Carlo Ferro shouted. “You are pretending not to understand.”
Placidly, but in a firm voice, I replied:
“I do not see why. If you, my dear Sir, wish to provoke me, you are making a mistake; not only because you have no reason, but also because, precisely like yourself, I am not in the habit of running away from anyone.”
Whereupon, “What do you mean?” he sneered. “I have had to run pretty fast to catch you!”
I gave a hearty laugh:
“Oh, so that’s it! You really thought that I was running away from you? You are mistaken, my dear Sir, and I can prove it to you straight away. You suspect, perhaps, that I have something to do with the arrival here, shortly, of a certain person who annoys you?”
“He doesn’t annoy me in the least!”
“All the better. On the strength of this suspicion, you were capable of believing that I was running away from you?”
“I know that you were a friend of a certain painter, who committed suicide at Naples.”
“Yes. Well?”
“Well, you who have mixed yourself up in this business….”
“I? Nothing of the sort! Who told you so? I know as much about it as you; perhaps not so much as you.”
“But you must know this Signor Nuti!”
“Nothing of the sort! I saw him, some years ago, as a young man on one or two occasions, not more. I have never spoken to him.”
“Which means…”
“Which means, my dear Sir, that not knowing this Signor Nuti, and feeling annoyed at seeing myself looked at askance for the last few days by you, from the suspicion that I had mixed myself up, or wished to mix myself up in this business, I did not wish you, just now, to overtake me, and so increased my

pace. That is the explanation of my _running away_. Are you satisfied?”
With a sudden change of expression Carlo Ferro held out his hand, saying with emotion:
“May I have the honour and pleasure of becoming your friend?”
I took his hand and answered:
“You know very well that I am so unimportant a person compared with yourself, that the honour will be mine.”
Carlo Ferro shook himself like a bear.
“Don’t say that! You are a man who knows his own business, more than any of the others; you know, you see, and you don’t speak…. What a world, Signor Grubbio, what a wicked world we live in! How revolting! Everyone seems… what shall I say? But why must it be like this? Disguised, disguised, always disguised! Can you tell me? Why, as soon as we come together, face to face, do we become like a lot of puppets? Yes, I too; I include myself; all of us! Disguised! One putting on this air, another that…. And inside we are different! We have a heart, inside us, like… like a child hiding in a corner, whose feelings are hurt, crying and ashamed! Yes, I assure you: the heart is ashamed! I am longing, Signor Gubbio, I am longing for a little sincerity… to be with other people as I so often am with myself, inside myself; a child, I swear to you, a new-born infant that whimpers because its precious mother, scolding it, has told it that she does not love it any more! I myself, always, when I feel the blood rush to my eyes, think of that old mother of mine, away in Sicily, don’t you know? But look out for trouble if I begin to cry! The tears in my eyes, if anyone doesn’t understand me and thinks that I am crying from fear, may at any moment turn to blood on my hands; I know it, and that is why I am always afraid when I feel the tears start to my eyes! My fingers, look, become like this!”

In the darkness of the wide, empty avenue, I saw him thrust out beneath my eyes a pair of muscular fists, savagely clenched and clawed.

Concealing with a great effort the disturbance which this unexpected outburst of sincerity aroused in me, so as not to exacerbate the
secret grief that was doubtless preying upon him and had found in this outburst, unintentionally I was certain on his part, a relief which he already regretted; I modulated my voice until I felt that I could speak in such a way that he, while appreciating my sympathy for his sincerity, might be led to think rather than to feel; and said:
“You are right; that is just how it is, Signor Ferro! But inevitably, don’t you see, we put constructions upon ourselves, living as we do in a social environment…. Why, society by its very nature is no longer the natural world. It is a constructed world, even in the material sense! Nature knows no home but the den or the cave.”
“Are you alluding to me?”
“To you? No.”
“Am I of the den or of the cave?”
“Why, of course not! I was trying to explain to you why, as I look at it, people invariably lie. And I say that while nature knows no other house than the den or cave, society _constructs_ houses; and man, when he comes from a _constructed_ house, where as it is he no longer leads a natural life, entering into relations with his fellows, _constructs_ himself also, that is all; presents himself, not as he is, but as he thinks he ought to be or is capable of being, that is to say in a construction adapted to the relations which each of us thinks that he can form with his neighbour. And so in the heart of things, that is to say inside these constructions of ours set face to face in this way, there remain carefully hidden, behind the blinds and shutters, our most intimate thoughts, our most secret feelings. But every now and then we feel that we are stifling; we are overcome by an irresistible need to tear down blinds and shutters, and shout out into the street, in everyone’s face, our thoughts, our feelings that we have so long kept hidden and secret.”

“Quite so… quite so…” Carlo Ferro repeated his endorsement several times, his face again darkening. “But there is a person who takes up his post behind those constructions of which you speak, like a dirty cutthroat at a street corner, to spring on you behind your back, in a treacherous assault! I know such a man, here with the Kosmograph, and you know him too.”

He was alluding of course to Polacco. I at once realised that he at that moment could not be made to think. He was feeling too keenly.

“Signor Gubbio,” he went on resolutely, “I see that you are a man, and I feel that to you I can speak openly. You might give this _constructed_ gentleman, whom we both know, a hint of what we have been saying. I cannot talk to him; I know my own violent nature; if I once start talking to him, I may know how I shall begin, I cannot tell where I may end. Because covert thoughts, and people who act covertly, who construct themselves, to use your expression, I simply cannot stand. To me they are like serpents, and I want to crush their heads, like that … look, like that….”

He stamped twice on the ground with his heel, furiously. Then he went on:

“What harm have I done him? What harm has my lady friend done him, that he should plot against us so desperately in secret? Don’t refuse, please… please don’t… you must be straight with me, for God’s sake! You won’t do it?”

“Why, yes…”

“You can see that I am speaking to you frankly? So please! Listen; it was he, knowing that I as a matter of honour would never try to back out, it was he that suggested my name to Commendator Borgalli for killing the tiger…. He went as far as that, do you understand! To the length of catching me on a point of honour and getting rid of me! You don’t agree? But that is the idea; the intention is that and nothing else: I tell you it is, and you’ve got to believe me! Because it doesn’t require any courage, as you know, to shoot a tiger in a cage: it requires calm, coolness is what it requires, a firm

hand, a keen eye. Very well, he nominates me! He puts me down for the part, because he knows that I can, at a pinch, be a wild beast when I'm face to face with a man, but that as a man face to face with a wild beast I am worth nothing! I have dash, calm is just what I lack! When I see a wild beast in front of me, my instinct tells me to rush at it; I have not the coolness to stand still where I am and take aim at it carefully so as to hit it in the right place. I have never shot; I don't know how to hold a gun; I am capable of flinging it away, of feeling it a burden on my hands, do you understand? And he knows this! He knows it perfectly! And so he has deliberately wished to expose me to the risk of being torn in pieces by that animal. And with what object? But just look, just look to what a pitch that man's perfidy has reached! He makes Nuti come here; he acts as his agent; he clears the way for him, by getting rid of me! 'Yes, my dear fellow, come,' will be what he has written to him, 'I shall look after you, I shall get him out of your way! Don't worry, but come!' You don't agree?"

So aggressive and peremptory was this question, that to have met it with a blunt plain-spoken dissent would have been to inflame his anger even farther. I merely shrugged my shoulders; and answered:
"What would you have me say? You yourself must admit that at this moment you are extremely excited."
"But how can I be calm?"
"No, there is that…"
"I am quite right, it seems to me!"
"Yes, yes, of course! But when one is in that state, my dear Ferro, it is also very easy to exaggerate things."
"Oh, so I am exaggerating, am I? Why, yes, … because people who are cool, people who reason, when they set to work quietly to commit a crime, _construct_ it in such a way that inevitably, if discovered, it must appear exaggerated. Of course they do! They have constructed it in silence with such cunning, ever so quietly, with gloves on, oh yes, so as not to

dirty their hands! In secret, yes, keeping it secret from themselves even! Oh, he has not the slightest idea that he is committing a crime! What! He would be horrified, if anyone were to call his attention to it. ‘I, a crime? Go on! How you exaggerate!’

But where is the exaggeration, by God? Reason it out for yourself as I do! You take a man and make him enter a cage, into which a tiger is to be driven, and you say to him: ‘Keep calm, now. Take a careful aim, and fire. Oh, and remember to bring it down with your first shot, see that you hit it in the right spot; otherwise, even if you wound it, it will spring upon you and tear you in pieces!’ All this, I know, if they choose a calm, cool man, a skilled marksman, is nothing, it is not a crime. But if they deliberately choose a man like myself? Think of it, a man like myself! Go and tell him: he will be amazed: ‘What! Ferro? Why, I chose him on purpose because I know how brave he is!’ There is the treachery! There is where the crime lurks: in that _knowing how brave I am_! In taking advantage of my courage, of my sense of honour, you follow me? He knows quite well that courage is not what is required! He pretends to think that it is! There is the crime! And go and ask him why, at the same time, he is secretly at work trying to pave the way for a friend of his who would like to get back the woman, the woman who is at present living with the very man nominated by him to enter the cage. He will be even more amazed! ‘Why, what connexion is there between the two things’? Oh, but really, he suspects this as well, does he? What an ex-ag-ge-ra-tion!’ Why, you yourself said that I exaggerated…. But think it over carefully; penetrate to the root of the matter; you will discover what he himself refuses to see, hiding beneath that artificial show of reason; tear off is gloves, and you will find that the gentleman’s hands are red with blood!”

I myself too had often thought, that each of us—however honest and upright he may esteem himself, considering his own actions in the abstract, that is to say apart from the incidents and coincidences that give them their weight and value—may commit

a crime _in secret even from himself_, that I was stupefied to hear my own thought expressed to me with such clearness, such debating force, and, moreover, by a man whom until then I had regarded as narrow-minded and of a vulgar spirit.

I was, nevertheless, perfectly convinced that Polacco was not acting _really_ with any consciousness of committing a crime, nor was he favouring Nuti for the purpose that Carlo Ferro suspected. But it might also, this purpose, be included _without his knowledge_, as well in the selection of Ferro to kill the tiger as in the facilitation of Nuti's coming: actions that only in appearance and in his eyes were unconnected. Certainly, since he could not _in any other way_ rid himself of the Nestoroff, the idea that she might once more become the mistress of Nuti, his friend, might be one of his secret aspirations, a desire that was not however apparent. As the mistress of one of his friends, the Nestoroff would no longer be such an enemy; not only that, but perhaps also Nuti, having secured what he wanted, and being as rich as he was, would refuse to allow the Nestoroff to remain an actress, and would take her away with him.

"But you," I said, "have still time, my'dear Ferro, if you think…"

"No, Sir!" he interrupted me sharply. "This Signor Nuti, by Polacco's handiwork, has already bought the right to join the Kosmograph."

"No, excuse me; what I mean is, you have still time to refuse the part that has been given you. No one who knows you can think that you are doing so from fear."

"They would all think it!" cried Carlo Ferro. "And I should be the first! Yes, Sir… because courage I can and do have, in front of a man, but in front of a wild beast, if I have not calm I cannot have courage; the man who does not feel calm must feel afraid. And I should feel afraid, yes Sir! Afraid not for myself, you understand! Afraid for the people who care for me. I have insisted that my mother should receive an insurance policy; but if to-morrow they give her a wad of

paper money stained with blood, my mother will die! What do you expect her to do with the money? You see the shame that conjurer has brought on me! The shame of saying these things, which appear to be dictated by a tremendous, preposterously exaggerated fear! Yes, because everything that I do, and feel, and say is bound to strike everyone as exaggerated. Good God, they have shot ever so many wild beasts in every cinematograph company, and no actor has ever been killed, no actor has ever taken the thing so seriously. But I take it seriously, because here, at this moment, I see myself played with, I see myself trapped, deliberately selected with the sole object of making me lose my calm! I am certain that nothing is going to happen; that it will all be over in a moment and that I shall kill the tiger without the slightest danger to myself. But I am furious at the trap that has been set for me, in the hope that some accident will happen to me, for which Signor Nuti, there you have it, will be waiting ready to step in, with the way clear before him. That… that… is what I… I…”

He broke off abruptly; clenched his fists together and wrung his hands, grinding his teeth. In a flash of inspiration, I realised that the man was torn by all the furies of jealousy. So that was why he had shouted after me! That was why he had spoken at such length! That was why he was in such a state!
And so Carlo Ferro is not sure of the Nestoroff. I scanned him by the light of one of the infrequent street-lamps: his face was distorted, his eyes glared savagely.
“My dear Ferro,” I assured him cordially, “if you think that I can be of use to you in any way, to the best of my ability…”
“Thanks!” he replied coldly. “No… it’s not possible… _you_ can’t…”
Perhaps he meant to say at first: “You are of no use to me!” He managed to restrain himself, and went on:
“You can help me only in one way: by telling this Signor Polacco that I am not a man to be played with, because whether it is my life or the lady, I am not the sort of man to let myself be robbed of either of them as easily as he seems to

think! That you can tell him! And that if anything should happen here—as it certainly will—it will be the worse for him: take the word of Carlo Ferro! Tell him this, and I am your grateful servant."
Barely indicating a contemptuous farewell with a wave of his hand, he lengthened his pace and left me.
And his offer of friendship?
How glad I was of this unexpected relapse into contempt! Carlo Ferro may think for a moment that he is my friend; he cannot feel any friendship for me. And certainly, to-morrow, he will hate me all the more, for having treated me this evening as a friend.

5.

I think that it would be a good thing for me if I had a different mind and a different heart.
Who will exchange with me?
Given my intention, which grows steadily more determined, to remain an impassive spectator, this mind, this heart are of little use to me. I have reason to believe (and more than once, before now, I have been glad of it) that the reality in which I invest other peoplecorresponds exactly to the reality in which those people invest themselves, because I endeavour to feel them in myself as they feel themselves, to wish for them as they wish for themselves: a reality, therefore, that is entirely disinterested. But I see at the same time that, without meaning it, I am letting myself be caught by that reality which, being what it is, ought to remain outside me: matter, to which I give a form, not for my sake, but for its own; something to contemplate.
No doubt, there is an underlying deception, a mocking deception in all this. I see myself caught. So much so, that I am no longer able even to smile, if, beside or beneath a complication of circumstances or passions which grows steadily stronger and more unpleasant, I see escape some other

circumstance or some other passion that might be expected to raise my spirits. The case of Signorina Luisetta Cavalena, for instance.

The other day Polacco had the inspiration to make that young lady come to the Bosco Sacro and there take a small part in a film. I know that, to engage her to take part in the remaining scenes of the film, he has sent her father a five hundred lire note and, as he promised, a pretty sunshade for herself and a collar with lots of little silver bells for the old dog, Piccini. He ought never to have done such a thing I It appears that Cavalena had given his wife to understand that, when he went with his scenarios to the Kosmograph, each with its inevitable gallant suicide, and all of them, therefore, invariably rejected, he never saw anyone there, except Cocò Polacco: Cocò Polacco and then home again. And who knows how he had described to her the interior of the Kosmograph: perhaps as an austere hermitage, from which all women were resolutely banished, like demons. Only, alas, the other day, the fierce wife, becoming suspicious, decided to accompany her husband. I do not know what she saw, but I can easily imagine it. The fact remains that this morning, just as I was going into the Kosmograph, I saw all four Cavalena arrive in a carriage: husband, wife, daughter and little dog: Signorina Luisetta, pale and trembling; Piccini, more surly than ever; Cavalena, looking as usual like a mouldy lemon, among the curls of his wig that protruded from under his broad-brimmed hat; his wife, like a cyclone barely held in check, her hat knocked askew as she dismounted from the carriage.
Under his arm Cavalena had the long parcel containing the sunshade presented by Polacco to his daughter and in his hand the box
containing Piccini’s collar. He had come to return them.
Signorina Luisetta recognised me at once. I hastened up to her to greet her; she wished to introduce me to her mother and father, but could not remember my name. I helped her out of her difficulty, by introducing myself.

“The operator, the man who turns the handle, you understand, Nene?” Cavalena at once explained, with timid haste, to his wife, smiling, asthough to implore a little condescension.

Heavens, what a face Signora Nene has! The face of an old, colourless doll. A compact helmet of almost quite grey hair presses upon her low, hard forehead, on which her eyebrows, joined together, short, bushy, and straight, are like a line boldly ruled to give a character of stupid tenacity to the pale eyes that gleam with a glassy stiffness.
She seems apathetic; but, if you study her closely, you observe on the surface of her skin certain strange nervous prickings, certain sudden changes of colour, in patches, which at once disappear. She also, every now and then, makes rapid unexpected gestures, of the most curious nature. I caught her, for instance, at one moment, in reply to a beseeching glance from her daughter, shaping her mouth in a round O across which she laid her finger. Evidently, this gesture was intended to mean:
“Silly girl! Why do you look at me like that?”
But they are always looking at her, surreptitiously at least, her husband and daughter, perplexed and anxious in their fear lest at any moment she may indulge in some flaming outburst of rage. And certainly, by looking at her like that, they irritate her all the
more. But imagine the life they lead, poor creatures!
Polacco has already given me some account of it. Perhaps she never thought of becoming a mother, this woman! She found this poor man, who, in her clutches, after all these years, has been reduced to the most pitiable condition imaginable; no matter: she will fight for him; she continues to fight for him savagely. Polacco tells me that, when assailed by the furies of jealousy, she loses all self-restraint; and in front of everyone, without a thought even of her daughter who stands listening, looking on, she strips bare (bare, as they flash before her eyes in those moments of fury) and lashes her husband’s alleged misdeeds: misdeeds that are highly

improbable. Certainly, in that hideous humiliation, Signorina Luisetta cannot fail to see her father in a ridiculous light, albeit, as can be seen from the way in which she looks at him, he must arouse so much pity in her! Ridiculous, from the way in which, stripped bare, lashed, the poor man still seeks to gather up from all sides, to cover himself in them hastily and as best he may, the shreds and tatters of his dignity.
Cocò Polacco has repeated to me some of the phrases in which, stunned by her savage, unexpected onslaughts, he replies to his wife at such moments: sillier, more ingenuous, more puerile things one could not imagine! And for that reason alone I am convinced that Cocò Polacco did not invent them himself.
“Nene, for pity’s sake, I am a man of five and forty…
“Nene, I have held His Majesty’s commission …
“Nene, good God, when a man has held a commission and gives you his word of honour…”

And yet, every now and then—oh, in the long run even a worm will turn—wounded with a refinement of cruelty in his most sacred feelings, barbarously chastised where the lash hurts most—every now and then, he says, it appears that Cavalena escapes from the house, bolts from his prison. Like a madman, at any moment he may be found wandering in the street, without a penny in his pocket, determined to “take up the threads of his life again” somewhere or other. He goes here and there in search of friends; and his friends, at first, welcome him joyously in the _caffè_, in the newspaper offices, because they like to see him enjoying himself; but the warmth of their welcome begins at once to cool as soon as he expresses his urgent need of finding employment once more among them, without a moment’s delay, in order that he may be able to provide for himself as quickly as possible. Yes indeed! Because he has not even the price of a cup of coffee, a mouthful of supper, a bed in an inn for the night. Who will oblige him, for the time being, with twenty lire or so? He makes an appeal, among the journalists, to the spirit of old

comradeship. He will come round next day with an article to his old paper. What? Yes, something literary or light and scientific. He has ever so much material stored up in his head… new stuff, you know…. Such as? Oh, Lord, such as, well, this…”
He has not finished speaking, before all these good friends burst out laughing in his face. New stuff? Why, Noah used to tell that to his sons, in the ark, to beguile the tedium of their voyage over the waters of the Deluge….

Ah, I too know them well, those old friends of the _caffè_! They all talk like that, in a forced burlesque manner, and each of them becomes excited by the verbal exaggerations of the rest and takes courage to utter an even grosser exaggeration, which does not however exceed the limit, does not depart from the tone, so as not to be received with a general outcry; they laugh at one another in turn, making a sacrifice of all their most cherished vanities, fling them in one another’s face with gay savagery, and apparently no one takes offence; but the resentment within grows, the bile ferments; the effort to keep the conversation in that burlesque tone which provokes laughter, because amid general laughter insults are tempered and lose their gall, becomes gradually more laboured and difficult; then, the prolonged, sustained effort leaves in each of them a weariness of anger and disgust; each of them is conscious with bitter regret of having done violence to his own thoughts, to his own feelings; more than remorse, an outraged sincerity; an inward uneasiness, as though the swelling, infuriated spirit no longer adhered to its own intimate substance; and they all heave deep sighs to rid themselves of the hot air of their own disgust; but, the very next day, they all fall back into that furnace, and scorch themselves, afresh, miserable grasshoppers, doomed to saw frantically away at their own shell of boredom.
Woe to him who arrives a newcomer, or returns after a certain interval to their midst! But Cavalena perhaps does not take

offence, does not complain of the sacrifice that his good friends make of him, tortured as he is in his heart by the discovery that he has failed, in his seclusion, to “keep in touch with life.” Since his last escape from the prison-house there have passed, shall we say, eighteen months? Well; it is as though there had passed eighteen centuries! All of them, as they hear issuing from his lips certain slang expressions, then the very latest thing, which he has preserved like precious jewels in the strong-box of his memory, screw up their faces and gaze at him, as one gazes in a chop-house at a warmed-up dish, which smells of rancid fat a mile off! Oh, poor Cavalena, just listen to him! Listen to him! He still admires the man who, eighteen months ago, was the greatest man of the twentieth century. But who was that? Ah, listen…. So and so of Such and such…. That idiot! That bore! That dummy! What, is he still alive? No, not really alive? Yes, Cavalena swears he saw him, actually alive, only a week ago; in fact, believing that… (no, as far as being alive goes, he is alive) still, if he is no longer a great man… why, he proposed to write an article about him … he won’t write it now!

Utterly abased, his face livid with bile, but with patches of red here and there, as though his friends in their mortification of him had amused themselves by pinching him on the brow, the cheeks, the nose, Cavalena meanwhile is inwardly devouring his wife, like a cannibal after a three-days’ fast: his wife, who has made him a public laughing-stock. He swears to himself that he will never again let himself fall into her clutches; but gradually, alas, his anxiety to resume “life” begins to transform itself into a mania which at first he is unable to define, but which becomes steadily more and more exasperating within him. For years past he has exercised all his mental faculties in defending his own dignity against the unjust suspicions of his wife. And now his faculties, suddenly diverted from this assiduous, desperate defence, are no longer adaptable, must make an effort to convert themselves and to devote themselves to other uses. But his dignity, so long and

so strenuously defended, has now settled upon him, like the mould of a statue, immovable. Cavalena feels himself empty inside, but outwardly incrusted all over. He has become the walking mould of this statue.He cannot any longer scrape it off himself. Forever, henceforward, inexorably, he is the most dignified man in the world. And this dignity of his has so exquisite a sensibility that it takes umbrage, grows disturbed at the slightest indication that is vouchsafed to it of the most trifling transgression of his duties as a citizen, a husband, the father of a family. He has so often sworn to his wife that he has never proved false, even in thought, to these duties, that really now he cannot even think of transgressing them, and suffers, and turns all the colours of the rainbow when he sees other people so light-heartedly transgressing them. His friends laugh at him and call him a hypocrite. There, in their midst, incrusted all over, amid the noise and impetuous volubility of a life that knows no restraint either of faith or of affection, Cavalena feels himself outraged, begins to imagine that he is in serious peril; he has the impression that he is standing on feet of glass in the midst of a tumult of madmen who trample on him with iron shoes. The life imagined in his seclusion as full of attractions and indispensable to him reveals itself as being vacuous, stupid, insipid. How can he have suffered so keenly from being deprived of the company of these friends; of the spectacle of all their fatuity, all the wretched disorder of their life?

Poor Cavalena! The truth perhaps lies elsewhere! The truth is that in his harsh seclusion, without meaning it, he has become too much accustomed to converse with himself, that is to say with the worst enemy that any of us can have; and thus has acquired a clear perception of the futility of everything, and has seen himself thus lost, alone, surrounded by shadows and crushed by the mystery of himself and of everything. … Illusions? Hopes? Of what use are they? Vanity…. And his own personality, prostrated, annulled in itself, has gradually re-

arisen as a pitiful consciousness of other people, who are ignorant and deceive themselves, who are ignorant and labour and love and suffer. What fault is it of his wife, his poor Nene, if she is so jealous? He is a doctor and knows that this fierce jealousy is really and truly a mental disease, a form of reasoning madness. Typical, a typical form of paranoia, with persecution mania too. He goes about telling everybody. Typical! Typical! She has finally come to suspect, his poor Nene, that he is seeking to kill her, in order to take possession, with the daughter, of her money! Ah, what an ideal life they would lead then, without her…. Liberty, liberty: one foot here, the other there! She says this, poor Nene, because she herself perceives that life, as she makes it for herself and for the others, is not possible, it is the destruction of life; she destroys herself, poor Nene, with her ravings, and naturally supposes that the others wish to destroy her: with a knife, no, because it would be discovered! By concentrated spite! And she does not observe that the spite originates with herself; originates in all the phantoms of her madness to which she gives substance. But is not he a doctor? And if he, as a doctor, understands all this, does it not follow that he ought to treat his poor Nene as a sick patient, not responsible for the harm she has done him and continues to do him? Why rebel? Against whom? He ought to feel for her and to shew pity, to stand by her lovingly, to endure with patience and resignation her inevitable cruelty. And then there is poor Luisetta, left alone in that hell, at the mercy of that mother who does not stop to think…. Ah, off with him, he must return home at once! At once. Perhaps, underlying his decision, masked by this pity for his wife and daughter, there is the need to escape from that precarious and uncertain life, which is no longer the life for him. Is he not, moreover, entitled to feel some pity for himself also? Who has brought him down to this state? Can he at his age take up life again, after having severed all the ties, after having closed all the doors, to please his wife? And, in the end, he goes back to shut himself up in his prison!

The poor man bears so clearly displayed in his whole appearance the great disaster that weighs upon him, he makes it so plainly visible in the embarrassment of his every step, his every glance, when he has his wife with him, by his constant terror lest she, in that step, in that glance, may find a pretext for a scene, that one cannot help laughing at him, sympathise with him as one may.

And perhaps I should have laughed at him too, this morning, had not Signorina Luisetta been there. Who knows what she is made to suffer by the inevitable absurdity of her father, poor girl.

A man of five and forty, reduced to that condition, whose wife is still so fiercely jealous of him, cannot fail to be grotesquely absurd! All the more so since, owing to another hidden tragedy, an indecent precocious baldness, the effect of typhoid fever, which he managed by a miracle to survive, the poor man is obliged to wear that artistic wig under a hat large enough to cover it. The effrontery of this hat and of all those curled locks that protrude from it is in such marked contrast to the frightened, shocked, cautious expression of his face, that it is nothing short of ruination to his seriousness, and must also, certainly, be a constant grief to his daughter.

“No, one moment, my dear Sir… excuse me, what did you say your name was!”

“Gubbio.”

“Gubbio, thanks. Mine is Cavalena, at your service.”

“Cavalena, thanks, I know.”

“Fabrizio Cavalena: in Rome I am better known as…”

“I should say so, a buffoon!”

Cavalena turned round, pale as death, his mouth agape, to gaze at his wife.

“Buffoon, buffoon, buffoon,” she reiterated, three times in succession.

“Nene, for heaven’s sake, shew some respect. …” Cavalena began threateningly; but all of a sudden he broke off: shut his eyes, screwed up his face, clenched his fists, as though

seized by a sudden, sharp internal spasm…. Not at all! It was the tremendous effort which he has to make every time to contain himself, to wring from his infuriated animal nature the consciousness that he is a doctor and ought therefore to treat and to pity his wife as a poor sick person.
“May I?”
And he took my arm in his, to draw me a little way apart.
“Typical, you know? Poor thing…. Ah, it requires true heroism, believe me, the greatest heroism on my part to put up with her. I should not be able, perhaps, if it were not for my poor child here.
But there! I was saying just now … this Polacco, God in heaven… this Polacco! But I ask you, is it a trick to play upon a friend, knowing my misfortune? He carries my daughter off to _pose_… with a light woman… with an actor who, notoriously… Can you imagine the scene that occurred at home! And then he sends me these presents… a collar too for the animal… and five hundred lire!”

I tried to make it clear to him that, so far at any rate as the presents and the five hundred lire went, it did not appear to me that there was any such harm in them as he chose to make out. He? But he saw no harm in them whatsoever! What harm should there bel He was delighted, overjoyed at what had happened! Most grateful in his heart of hearts to Polacco for having given that little part to his daughter! He had to pretend to be so indignant to appease his wife. I noticed this at once, as soon as I had begun to speak. He was enraptured with the argument that I set before him, proving that after all no harm had been done. He gripped me by the arm, led me impetuously back to his wife.
“Do you hear? Do you hear?… I know nothing about it…. This gentleman says… Tell her, will you please, tell her what you said to me. I don’t wish to open my mouth…. I came here with the presents and the five hundred lire, you understand? To hand everything back.
But if that would be, as this gentleman says… I know nothing

about it… a gratuitous insult … replying with rudeness to a person who never had the slightest intention to offend us, to do us any harm, because he thinks that… I know nothing, I know nothing… that there is no occasion… I beg of you, in heaven's name, my dear Sir, do you speak… repeat to my wife what you have been so kind as to say to me!"

But his wife did not give me time to speak: she sprang upon me with the glassy, phosphorescent eyes of a maddened cat.
"Don't listen to this buffoon, hypocrite, clown! It is not his daughter he's thinking about, it is not the figure he would cut! He wants to hang about here all day, because here it would be like being in his own garden, with all the pretty ladies he's so fond of, artists like himself, mincing round him! And he's not ashamed, the scoundrel, to put his daughter forward as an excuse, to shelter behind his daughter, at the cost of compromising her and ruining her, the wretch!
He would have the excuse of bringing his daughter here, you understand? He would come here for his daughter!"
"But you would come too," Fabrizio Cavalena shouted, losing all patience. "Aren't you here too? With me?"
"I?" roared his wife. "I, here?"
"Why not?" Cavalena went on unperturbed; and, turning again to myself:
"Tell her, you tell her, does not Zeme come here as well?"
"Zeme?" inquired the wife in perplexity, knitting her brows. "Who is Zeme?"
"Zeme, the Senator!" exclaimed Cavalena. "A Senator of the Realm, a scientist of world-wide fame!"
"He must be as big a clown as yourself!"
"Zeme, who goes to the Quirinal? Invited to all the State Banquets? The venerable Senator Zeme, the pride of Italy! The Keeper of the
Astronomical Observatory! Good Lord, you ought to be ashamed of yourself! Shew some respect, if not for me, for one of the glories of
the country! He has been here, hasn't he? But speak, my dear

Sir, tell her, for pity's sake, I beg of you! Zeme has been here, he has helped to arrange a film, hasn't he? He, Senator Zeme! And if Zeme comes here, if Zeme offers his services, a world-famous scientist, then, I mean to say… surely I can come here too, can offer my services too…. But it doesn't matter to me in the least! I shall not come again! I am speaking now to make it clear to this woman that this is not a place of ill-fame, to which I, for immoral purposes, am seeking to lead my daughter to her ruin! You will understand, my dear Sir, and forgive me: this is why I am speaking. It burns my ears to hear it said in front of my daughter that I wish to compromise her, to ruin her, by taking her to a place of ill-fame. … Come, come, do me a favour: take me in at once to Polacco, so that I may give him back these presents and the money, and thank him for them. When a man has the misfortune to possess a wife like mine, he ought to dig a grave for himself, and finish things off once and for all! Take me in to Polacco!"

What happened was not my fault on this occasion either, but, flinging open carelessly, without knocking, the door of the Art Director's office, in which Polacco was to be found, I saw inside a spectacle which at once altered my state of mind completely, so that I was no longer able to give a thought to Cavalena, nor indeed to see anything clearly.
Huddled in the chair by Polacco's desk a man was sobbing, his face buried in his hands, desperately.
Immediately Polacco, seeing the door open, raised his head abruptly and made an angry sign to me to shut it.
I obeyed. The man who was sobbing inside the room was unquestionably Aldo Nuti. Cavalena, his wife, his daughter, looked at me in bewilderment.
"What is it?" Cavalena asked.
I could barely find the breath to answer:
"There's… there's some one there…."
Shortly afterwards, there issued from the Art Director's office Cocò Polacco, in evident confusion. He saw Cavalena and made a sign to him to wait:

“You here? Excellent. I want to speak to you.”
And without so much as a thought of greeting the ladies, he took me by the arm and drew me aside.
“He has come! He simply must not be left alone for a minute! I have mentioned you to him. He remembers you perfectly. Where are your lodgings? Wait a minute! Do you mind….”
He turned and called to Cavalena.
“You let a couple of rooms, don’t you? Are they vacant just now?”
“I should think so!” sighed Cavalena. “For the last three months and more….”
“Gubbio,” Polacco said to me, “I want you to give up your lodgings at once; pay whatever you have to pay, a month’s rent, two months’, three months’; take one of these two rooms at Cavalena’s. The other will be for him.”
“Delighted!” Cavalena exclaimed radiant, holding out both his hands to me.
“Hurry up,” Polacco went on. “Off with you! You, go and get the rooms ready; you, pack up your traps and transport everything at once to Cavalena’s. Then come back here! Is that all quite clear?”

I threw open my arms, resigned.
Polacco retired to his room. And I drove off with the Cavalena family, bewildered, and most anxious to have from me an explanation of all this mystery.

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

In Italiano – Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio, operatore

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