

Shoot! – Book VI

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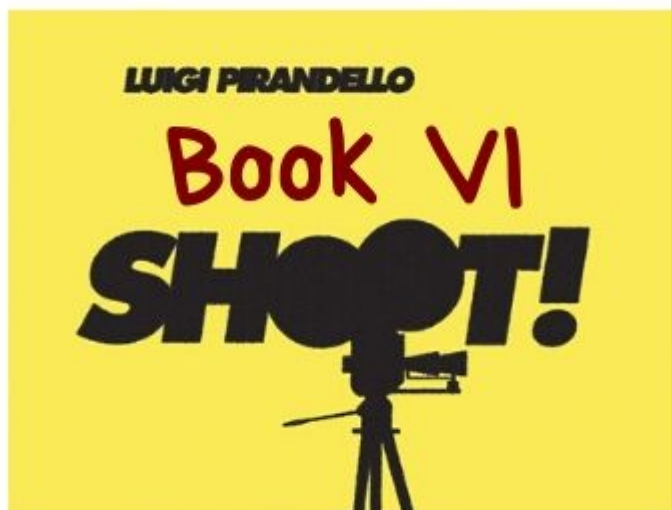
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Shoot! – Book VI

1.

Sweet and cool is the pulp of winter pears, but often, here and there, it hardens in a bitter knot. Your teeth, in the act of biting, come

upon the hard piece and are set on edge. So is it with our position, which might be sweet and cool, for two of us at any rate, were we not conscious of the intrusion of something bitter and hard.

We have been going together, for the last three days, every morning, Signorina Luisetta, Aldo Nuti and I, to the

Kosmograph.

Of the two of us, Signora Nene trusts me, certainly not Nuti, with her daughter. But the said daughter, of the two of us, certainly seems rather to be going with Nuti than to be coming with me.

Meanwhile:

I see Signorina Luisetta, and do not see Nuti;

Signorina Luisetta sees Nuti and does not see me;

Nuti sees neither me nor Signorina Luisetta.

So we proceed, all three of us, side by side, but without seeing ourselves in one another's company.

Signorina Nene's confidence ought to irritate me, ought to...

what else? Nothing. It ought to irritate me, it ought to degrade me: instead of which, it does not irritate me, it does not degrade me. It moves me, if anything. So as to make me feel more contemptuous than ever.

And so I consider the nature of this confidence, in an attempt to overcome my contemptuous emotion.

It is certainly an extraordinary tribute to my incapacity, on one hand; to my capacity, on the other. The latter—I mean the tribute to my capacity—might in one respect flatter me; but it is quite certain that this tribute has not been paid me by Signora Nene without a slight trace of derisive pity.

A man who is incapable of doing evil cannot, in her eyes, be a man at all. So that this other capacity of mine cannot be a manly quality.

It appears that we cannot help doing evil, if we are to be regarded as men. For my own part, I know quite well, perfectly well, that I am a man: evil I have done, and in abundance! But it appears that other people do not choose to notice it. And that makes me furious. It makes me furious because, obliged to assume that certificate of incapacity—which both is and is not mine—I often find my shoulders bowed, by the arrogance of other people, under a fine cloak of hypocrisy. And how often have I groaned beneath the weight of that cloak! At no time, I

am certain, so often as during the last few days.

I feel almost inclined to go and look Signora Nene in the face in a certain fashion, so that. ... But, no, no, what an idea, poor woman! She has grown so meek, all of a sudden, so helpless rather, after that furious outbreak by her daughter and this sudden determination to become a cinematograph actress! You ought to see her when, shortly before we leave the house, every morning, she comes up to me and, behind her daughter's back, raises her hands ever so slightly, with a furtive movement, and with a piteous look in her eyes:

"Take care of her," she stammers.

The situation, as soon as we arrive at the Kosmograph, changes and becomes highly serious, notwithstanding the fact that at the entrance, every morning, we find—punctual to a second and trembling all over with anxiety—Cavalena. I have already told him, the day before yesterday and again yesterday, of the change in his wife; but Cavalena shews no sign as yet of becoming a Doctor again. Far from it! The day before yesterday and again yesterday, he seemed to be carried away before my eyes in a fit of distraction, as though trying not to let himself be affected by what I was saying to him:

"Oh, indeed? Good, good..." was his answer. "But I, for the present... What is that you say? No, excuse me, I thought... I am glad, don't you know? But if I go back, it will all come to an end.

Heaven help us! What I have to do at present is to stay here and consolidate Luisetta's position and my own."

Ah yes, consolidate: father and daughter might be treading on air. I reflect that their life might be easy and comfortable, their story unfold in a sweet, serene peace. There is the mother's fortune; Cavalena, honest man, could attend quietly to his profession; there would be no need to take strangers into their home, and Signorina Luisetta, on the window sill of a peaceful little house in the sun, might gracefully cultivate, like flowers, the fairest dreams of girlhood. But no! This fiction which ought to be the reality, as everyone

sees, for everyone admits that Signora Nene has absolutely no reason to torment her husband, this thing which ought to be the reality, I say, is a dream. The reality, on the other hand, must be something different, utterly remote from this dream. The reality is Signora Nene's madness. And in the reality of this madness—which is of necessity an agonised, exasperated disorder—here they are flung out of doors, straying, helpless, this poor man and this poor girl. They wish to consolidate their position, both of them, in this reality of madness, and so they have been wandering about here for the last two days, side by side, sad and speechless, through the studios and grounds.

Cocò Polacco, to whom with Nuti they report on their arrival, tells them that there is nothing for them to do at present. But the engagement is in force; the salary is mounting up. It is unnecessary, therefore, for Signorina Luisetta to take the trouble to come; if she is not to pose, she does not lose anything.

But this morning, at last, they have made her pose. Polacco lent her to his fellow producer Bongarzoni for a small part in a coloured film, in eighteenth century costume.

I have been working for the last few days with Bongarzoni. On reaching the Kosmograph I hand over Signorina Luisetta to her father, go to the Positive Department to fetch my camera, and often it happens that for hours on end I see nothing more of Signorina Luisetta, nor of Nuti, nor of Polacco, nor of Cavalea. So that I was not aware that Polacco had given Bongarzoni Signorina Luisetta for this small part. I was thunderstruck when I saw her appear before me as if she had stepped out of a picture by Watteau.

She was with the Sgrelli, who had just completed a careful and loving supervision of her toilet in the "costume" wardrobe, and with one finger was pressing to her cheek a silken patch that refused to stick. Bongarzoni was lavish with his compliments, and the poor child made an effort to smile

without moving her head, for fear of overbalancing the enormous pile of hair above it. She did not know how to move her limbs in that billowing silken skirt.

And now the little scene is arranged. An outside staircase, leading down to a stretch of park. The little lady appears from a glazed balcony; trips down a couple of steps; leans over the pillared balustrade to gaze out across the park, timid, perplexed, in a state of anxious alarm: then runs quickly down the remaining steps and hides a note, which is in her hand, under the laurel that is growing in a bowl on the pillar at the foot of the balustrade.

“Are you ready? Shoot!”

Never before have I turned the handle of my machine with such delicacy. This great black spider on its tripod has had her twice, now, for its dinner. But the first time, out in the Bosco Sacro, my hand, in turning the handle to give her to the machine to eat, did not yet feel. Whereas, on this occasion...

Ah, I am ruined, if ever my hand begins to feel! No, Signorina Luissetta, no: it is evident that you must not continue in this vile trade. Quite so, I know why you are doing it! They all tell you, Bongarzoni himself told you this morning that you have a quite exceptional natural gift for the scenic art; and I tell you so too; not because of this morning's rehearsal, though. Oh, you went through your part as well as anyone could wish; but I know very well, I know very well how you were able to give such a marvellous rendering of anxious alarm, when, after coming down the first two steps, you leaned over the balustrade to gaze into the distance. I know so well that almost, now and then, I turned my head too to gaze where you were gazing, to see whether at that moment the Nestoroff might not have arrived.

For the last three days, here, you have been living in this state of anxiety and alarm. Not you only; although more, perhaps, than anyone else. At any moment, indeed, the Nestoroff may arrive. She has not been seen for more than a

week. But she is in Rome; she has not left. Only Carlo Ferro has left, with five or six other actors and Bertini, for Tarante.

On the day of Carlo Ferro's departure (about a fortnight ago), Polacco came to me radiant, as though a stone had been lifted from his chest.

"What did I tell you, simpleton? He would go to hell if she told him to!"

"I only hope," I answered, "that we shan't see him burst in here suddenly like a bomb."

But it is already a great thing, certainly, and one that to me remains inexplicable, that he should have gone. His words still echo in my ears:

"I may be a wild beast when I'm face to face with a man, but as a man face to face with a wild beast I'm worth nothing!"

And yet, with the consciousness of being worth nothing, on a point of honour, he did not draw back, he did not refuse to face the beast; now, having a man to face, he has fled. Because it is indisputable that his departure, the day after Nuti's arrival, has every appearance of flight.

I do not deny that the Nestoroff has such power over him that she can compel him to do what she wishes. But I have heard roaring in him, simply because of Nuti's coming, all the fury of jealousy. His rage at Polacco's having put him down to kill the tiger was not due only to the suspicion that Polacco was hoping in this way to get rid of him, but also and even more to the suspicion that he has made Nuti come here at the same time in order that Nuti may be free to recapture the Nestoroff. And it seems obvious to me that he is not sure of her. Why then has he gone?

No, no: there is most certainly something behind this, a secret agreement; this departure must be concealing a trap. The Nestoroff could never have induced him to go by shewing him that she was afraid of losing him, in any event, by allowing him to remain here to await the coming of a man who

was certainly coming with the deliberate intention of provoking him. A fear of that sort would never have made him go. Or, at least, she would have gone with him. If she has remained here and he has gone, leaving the field clear for Nuti, it means that an agreement must have been reached between them, a net woven so strongly and securely that he himself has been able to pack tip his jealousy in it and so keep it in check. No sign of fear can she have shewn him; rather, the agreement having been reached, she must have demanded this proof of his faith in her, that he should leave her here alone to face Nuti. In fact, for several days after Carlo Ferro's departure, she continued to come to the Kosmograph, evidently prepared for an encounter with Nuti. She cannot have come for any other reason, free as she now is from any professional engagement. She ceased to come, when she learned that Nuti was seriously ill.

But now, at any moment, she may return.

What is going to happen?

Polacco is once again on tenterhooks. He never lets Nuti out of his sight; if he is obliged to leave him for a moment, he first of all makes a covert signal to Cavalena. But Nuti, for all that, now and again, some slight obstacle makes him break out in a way that points to an exasperation forcibly held in check, is relatively calm; he seems also to have shaken off the sombre mood of the early days of his convalescence; he allows himself to be led about everywhere by Polacco and Cavalena; he shews a certain curiosity to make a closer acquaintance with this world of the cinematograph and has carefully visited, with the air of a stern inspector, both the departments.

Polacco, hoping to distract him, has twice suggested that he should try some part or other. He has declined, saying that he wishes to

gain a little experience first by watching the others act.

"It is a labour," he observed yesterday in my hearing, after he had watched the production of a scene, "and it must also be

an effort that destroys, alters and exaggerates people's expressions, this acting without words. In speaking, the action comes automatically; but without speaking...."

"You speak to yourself," came with a marvellous seriousness from the little Sgrelli (La Sgrellina, as they all call her here). "You speak to yourself, so as not to force the action...."

"Exactly," Nuti went on, as though she had taken the words out of his mouth.

The Sgrellina then laid her forefinger on her brow and looked all round her with an assumption of silliness which asked, with the most delicate irony:

"Who said I wasn't intelligent?"

We all laughed, including Nuti. Polacco could hardly refrain from kissing her. Perhaps he hopes that she, Nuti having taken the place here of Gigetto Fleccia, may decide that he ought also to take Fleccia's place in her affections, and may succeed in performing the miracle of detaching him from the Nestoroff. To enhance and give ample food to this hope, he has introduced him also to all the young actresses of the four companies; but it seems that Nuti, although exquisitely polite to all of them, does not shew the slightest sign of wishing to be detached. Besides, all the rest, even if they were not already, more or less, bespoke, would take great care not to stand in the Sgrellina's way. And as for the Sgrellina, I am prepared to bet that she has already observed that she would be doing an injury, herself, to a certain young lady, who has been coming for the last three days to the Kosmograph with Nuti and with Shoot.

Who has not observed it? Only Nuti himself! And yet I have a suspicion that he too has observed it. And the strange thing is this, and should like to find a way of pointing it out to Signorina Luissetta: that his perception of her feeling for him creates an effect in him the opposite of that for which she longs: it turns him away from her and makes him strain all the

more ardently after the Nestoroff. Because it is obvious now that Nuti remembers having identified her, in his delirium, with Duccella; and since he knows that she cannot and does not wish to love him any longer, the love that he perceives in Signorina Luisetta must of necessity appear to him a sham, no longer pitiful, now that his delirium has passed; but rather pitiless: a burning memory, which makes the old wound ache again.

It is impossible to make Signorina Luisetta understand this. Glued by the clinging blood of a victim to his love for two different women, each of whom rejects him, Nuti can have no eyes for her; he may see in her the deception, that false Duccella, who for a moment appeared to him in his delirium; but now the delirium has passed, what was a pitiful deception has become for him a cruel memory, all the more so the more he sees the phantom of that deception persist in it.

And so, instead of retaining him, Signorina Luisetta with this phantom of Duccella drives him away, thrusts him more blindly than ever into the arms of the Nestoroff.

For her, first of all; then for him, and lastly—why not?—for myself, I see no other remedy than an extreme, almost a desperate attempt: that I should go to Sorrento, reappear after all these years in the old home of the grandparents, to revive in Duccella the earliest memory of her love and, if possible, take her away and make her come here to give substance to this phantom, which another girl, here, for her sake, is desperately sustaining with her pity and love.

2.

A note from the Nestoroff, this morning at eight o'clock (a sudden and mysterious invitation to call upon her with Signorina Luisetta on our way to the Kosmograph), has made me postpone my departure.

I remained standing for a while with the note in my hand, not knowing what to make of it. Signorina Luisetta, already

dressed to go out, came down the corridor past the door of my room; I called to her.

"Look at this. Read it."

Her eyes ran down to the signature; as usual, she turned a deep red, then deadly pale; when she had finished reading it, she fixed her eyes on me with a hostile expression, her brow contracted in doubt and alarm, and asked in a faint voice: "What does she want?"

I waved my hands in the air, not so much because I did not know what answer to make as in order to find out first what she thought about it.

"I am not going," she said, with some confusion. "What can she want with me?"

"She must have heard," I explained, "that he ... that Signor Nuti is staying here, and..."

"And?"

"She may perhaps have some message to give, I don't know... for him."

"To me?"

"Why, I imagine, to you too, since she asks you to come with me..."

She controlled the trembling of her body; she did not succeed in controlling that of her voice:

"And where do I come in?"

"I don't know; I don't come in either," I pointed out to her.

"She wants us both..."

"And what message can she have to give me ... for Signor Nuti?"

I shrugged my shoulders and looked at her with a cold firmness to call her back to herself and to indicate to her that she, in so far as her own person was concerned—she, as Signorina Luisetta, could have no reason to feel this aversion, this disgust for a lady for whose kindness she had originally been so grateful.

She understood, and grew even more disturbed.

"I suppose," I went on, "that if she wishes to speak to you also, it will be for some good purpose; in fact, it is certain to be. You take

offence...”

“Because... because I cannot... possibly ... imagine...” she broke out, hesitating at first, then with headlong speed, her face catching fire as she spoke, “what in the world she can have to say to me, even if, as you suppose, it is for a good purpose. I...”

“Stand apart, like myself, from the whole affair, you mean?” I at once took her up, with increasing coldness. “Well, possibly she thinks that you may be able to help in some way...”

“No, no, I stand apart; you are quite right,” she hastened to reply, stung by my words. “I intend to remain apart, and not to have anything to do, so far as Signor Nuti is concerned, with this lady.”

“Do as you please,” I said. “I shall go alone. I need not remind you that it would be as well not to say anything to Nuti about this invitation.”

“Why, of course not!”

And she withdrew.

I remained for a long time considering, with the note in my hand, the attitude which, quite unintentionally, I had taken up in this short conversation with Signorina Luisetta.

The kindly intentions with which I had credited the Nestoroff had no other foundation than Signorina Luisetta’s curt refusal to accompany me in a secret manoeuvre which she instinctively felt to be directed against Nuti. I stood up for the Nestoroff simply because she, in inviting Signorina Luisetta to her house in my company, seems to me to have been intending to detach her from Nuti and to make her my companion, supposing her to be my friend.

Now, however, instead of letting herself be detached from Nuti, Signorina Luisetta has detached herself from me and has made me go alone to the Nestoroff. Not for a moment did she stop to consider the fact that she had been invited to come with me; the idea of keeping me company had never even

occurred to her; she had eyes for none but Nuti, could think only of him; and my words had certainly produced no other effect on her than that of ranging me on the side of the Nestoroff against Nuti, and consequently against herself as well.

Except that, having now failed in the purpose for which I had credited the other with kindly intentions, I fell back into my original perplexity and in addition became a prey to a dull irritation and began to feel in myself also the most intense distrust of the Nestoroff. My irritation was with Signorina Luisetta, because, having failed in my purpose, I found myself obliged to admit that she had after all every reason to be distrustful. In fact, it suddenly became evident to me that I only needed Signorina Luisetta's company to overcome all my distrust. In her absence, a feeling of distrust was beginning to take possession of me also, the distrust of a man who knows that at any moment he may be caught in a snare which has been spread for him with the subtlest cunning.

In this state of mind I went to call upon the Nestoroff, unaccompanied. At the same time I was urged by an anxious curiosity as to what she would have to say to me, and by the desire to see her at close quarters, in her own house, albeit I did not expect either from

her or from the house any intimate revelation.

I have been inside many houses, since I lost my own, and in almost all of them, while waiting for the master or mistress of the house to appear, I have felt a strange sense of mingled annoyance and distress, at the sight of the more or less handsome furniture, arranged with taste, as though in readiness for a stage performance. This distress, this annoyance I feel more strongly than other people, perhaps, because in my heart of hearts there lingers inconsolable the regret for my own old-fashioned little house, where everything breathed an air of intimacy, where the old sticks of furniture, lovingly cared for, invited us to a frank, familiar confidence and seemed glad to retain the marks of the use we had made of them, because in those marks, even if the

furniture was slightly damaged by them, lingered our memories of the life we had lived with it, in which it had had a share. But really I can never understand how certain pieces of furniture can fail to cause if not actually distress at least annoyance, furniture with which we dare not venture upon any confidence, because it seems to have been placed there to warn us with its rigid, elegant grace, that our anger, our grief, our joy must not break bounds, nor rage and struggle, nor exult, but must be controlled by the rules of good breeding. Houses made for the rest of the world, with a view to the part that we intend to play in society; houses of outward appearance, where even the furniture round us can make us blush if we happen for a moment to find ourselves behaving in some fashion that is not in keeping with that appearance nor consistent with the part that we have to play.

I knew that the Nestoroff lived in an expensive furnished flat in Via Mecenate. I was shown by the maid (who had evidently been warned of my coming) into the drawing-room; but the maid was a trifle disconcerted owing to this previous warning, since she expected to see me arrive with a young lady. You, to the people who do not know you, and they are so many, have no other reality than that of your light trousers or your brown greatcoat or your "English" moustache. I to this maid was a person who was to come with a young lady. Without the young lady, I might be some one else. Which explains why, at first, I was left standing outside the door.

"Alone? And your little friend?" the Nestoroff was asking me a moment later in the drawing-room. But the question, when half uttered, between the words "your" and "little," sank, or rather died away in a sudden change of feeling. The word "friend" was barely audible.

This sudden change of feeling was caused by the pallor of my bewildered face, by the look in my eyes, opened wide in an almost savage stupefaction.

Looking at me, she at once guessed the reason of my pallor and bewilderment, and at once she too turned pale as death; her

eyes became strangely clouded, her voice failed, and her whole body trembled before me as though I were a ghost.

The assumption of that body of hers into a prodigious life, in a light by which she could never, even in her dreams, have imagined herself as being bathed and warmed, in a transparent, triumphant harmony with a nature round about her, of which her eyes had certainly never beheld the jubilation of colours, was repeated six times over, by a miracle of art and love, in that drawing-room, upon six canvases by Giorgio Mirelli.

Fixed there for all time, in that divine reality which he had conferred on her, in that divine light, in that divine fusion of colours, the woman who stood before me was now what? Into what hideous bleakness, into what wretchedness of reality had she now fallen? And how could she have had the audacity to dye with that strange coppery colour the hair which there, on those six canvases, gave with its natural colour such frankness of expression to her earnest face, with its ambiguous smile, with its gaze plunged in the melancholy of a sad and distant dream!

She humbled herself, shrank back as though ashamed into herself, beneath my gaze which must certainly have expressed a pained contempt. From the way in which she looked at me, from the sorrowful contraction of her eyebrows and lips, from her whole attitude I gathered that not only did she feel that she deserved my contempt, but she accepted it and was grateful to me for it, since in that contempt, which she shared, she tasted the punishment of her crime and of her fall. She had spoiled herself, she had dyed her hair, she had brought herself to this wretched reality, she was living with a coarse and violent man, to make a sacrifice of herself: so much was evident; and she was determined that henceforward no one should approach her to deliver her from that self-contempt to which she had condemned herself, in which she reposed her pride, because only in that firm and fierce determination to despise herself did she still feel herself worthy of the luminous dream, in which for a moment she had drawn breath and

to which a living and perennial testimony remained to her in the prodigy of those six canvases.

Not the rest of the world, not Nuti, but she, she alone, of her own accord, doing inhuman violence to herself, had torn herself from that dream, had dashed headlong from it. Why? Ah, the reason, perhaps, was to be sought elsewhere, far away. Who knows the secret ways of the soul? The torments, the darkenings, the sudden, fatal determinations? The reason, perhaps, must be sought in the harm that men had done to her from her childhood, in the vices by which she had been ruined in her early, vagrant life, and which in her own conception of them had so outraged her heart that she no longer felt it to deserve that a young man should with his love rescue and ennoble it.

As I stood face to face with this woman so fallen, evidently most unhappy and by her unhappiness made the enemy of all mankind and most of all of herself, what a sense of degradation, of disgust assailed me suddenly at the thought of the vulgar pettiness of the relations in which I found myself involved, of the people with whom I had undertaken to deal, of the importance which I had bestowed and was bestowing upon them, their actions, their feelings! How idiotic that fellow Nuti appeared to me, and how grotesque in his tragic fatuity as a fashionable dandy, all crumpled and soiled in his starched finery clotted with blood! Idiotic and grotesque the Cavaleña couple, husband and wife! Idiotic Polacco, with his air of an invincible leader of men! And idiotic above all my own part, the part which I had allotted to myself of a comforter on the one hand, on the other of the guardian, and, in my heart of hearts, the saviour of a poor little girl, whom the sad, absurd confusion of her family life had led also to assume a part almost identical with my own; namely that of the phantom saviour of a young man who did not wish to be saved!

I felt myself, all of a sudden, alienated by this disgust from everyone and everything, including myself, liberated and so to

speak emptied of all interest in anything or anyone, restored to my function as the impassive manipulator of a photographic machine, recaptured only by my original feeling, namely that all this clamorous and dizzy mechanism of life can produce nothing now but stupidities. Breathless and grotesque stupidities! What men, what intrigues, what life, at a time like this? Madness, crime or stupidity. A cinematographic life?

Here, for instance: this woman who stood before me, with her coppery hair. There, on the six canvases, the art, the luminous dream of a young man who was unable to live at a time like this. And here, the woman, fallen from that dream, fallen from art to the cinematograph. Up, then, with a camera and turn the handle! Is there a drama here? Behold the principal character.

“Are you ready? Shoot!”

3.

The woman, as from the expression on my face she had at once realised my contempt for her, realised also the sense of degradation, the disgust that filled me, and the impulse that followed them.

The first, my contempt, had pleased her, possibly because she intended to make use of it for her own secret ends, submitting to it before my eyes with an air of pained humility. My sense of degradation, my disgust had not displeased her, perhaps because she herself felt them also and even more than I. What she resented was my sudden coldness, was seeing me all at once resume the cloak of my professional impassivity. And she too stiffened; looked at me coldly, and said:

“I expected to see you with Signorina Cavaleña.”

“I gave her your note to read,” I replied. “She was just starting for

the Kosmograph. I asked her to come.”

“She would not?”

"She did not like to. Perhaps in her capacity as a hostess..."

"Ah!" she threw back her head, "Why," she went on, "that was precisely why I asked her to come, because she was acting as a hostess."

"I pointed that out to her," I said.

"And she did not think that she ought to come?"

I raised my hands.

She remained for a moment in thought; then, almost with a sigh, said:

"I have made a mistake. That day (do you remember?) when we all went together to the Bosco Sacro, she struck me as so charming, and pleased, too, at having my company, I realise that she was not a hostess then. But, surely, you are her guest also?"

She smiled, hoping to hurt me, as she aimed this question at me like a treacherous blow. And indeed, notwithstanding my determination to remain aloof from everything and everyone, I did feel hurt. So much so that I replied:

"But with two guests, as you must know, one may seem more important than the other."

"I thought it was just the opposite," she replied. "You don't like her?"

"I neither like her nor dislike her, Signora."

"Is that really so? Forgive me, I have no right to expect you to be frank with me. But I decided that I would be frank with you to-day."

"And I have come..."

"Because Signorina Cavalea, as you tell me, wished to let it be seen that she attaches more importance to her other guest?"

"No, Signora. Signorina Cavalea said that she wished to remain apart."

"And you too?"

"I have come."

"And I thank you, most cordially. But you have come alone! And that—perhaps I am again mistaken—does not encourage me, not that I suppose for a moment, mind, that you, like Signorina Cavalea, attach more importance to the other guest; on the

contrary..."

"You mean?"

"That this other guest is of no importance to you whatever; not only that, but that you would actually be glad if he were to meet with some accident, if only because Signorina Cavalea, by refusing to come with you, has shewn that she placed his interests above yours. Do I make myself clear?"

"Ah, no, Signora, you are mistaken!" I exclaimed sharply.

"It does not annoy you?"

"Not in the least. That is to say... well, to be honest... it does annoy me, but it no longer affects me personally. I do really feel that I stand apart."

"There, you see?" she interrupted me. "I feared as much, when I saw you come in by yourself. Confess that you would not feel yourself so much apart at this moment if the Signorina had come with you..."

"But if I have come myself!"

"To remain apart."

"No, Signora. Listen, I have done more than you think. I have discussed the whole matter fully with that poor fellow and have tried in every possible way to make it clear to him that he has no right to expect anything after all that has happened, according to his own account at least."

"What has he told you?" asked the Nestoreff, in a tone of determination, her face darkening.

"All sorts of silly things, Signora," I replied. "He is raving. And his state is all the more alarming, believe me, since he is incapable, to my mind, of any really serious and deep feeling. As is already shewn by the fact of his coming here with a certain plan..."

"Of revenge?"

"Not exactly of revenge. He doesn't know himself, even, what he feels. It is partly remorse ... a remorse which he does not wish to feel; the irritating sting of which he feels only upon the surface, because, I repeat, he is equally incapable of a true, a sincere repentance which might mature him, make him recover his senses. And so it is partly the irritation of

this remorse, which is maddening; partly rage, or rather (rage is too strong a word to apply to him) let us say vexation, a bitter vexation, which he does not admit, at having been tricked."

"By me?"

"No. He will not admit it!"

"But you think so?"

"I think, Signora, that you never took him seriously, that you made use of him to break away from..."

I refused to utter the name: I pointed towards the six canvases. The Nestoroff knitted her brows, lowered her head. I stood gazing at her for a moment and, deciding to go on to the bitter end, pressed the point:

"He speaks of a betrayal. Of his betrayal by Mirelli, who killed himself because of the proof that he wished to give him that it was easy to obtain from you (if you will pardon my saying so) what Mirelli himself had failed to obtain."

"Ah, he says that, does he?" broke from the Nestoroff.

"He says it, but he admits that he never obtained anything from you. He is raving. He wishes to attach himself to you, because if he goes on like this (he says) he will go mad."

The Nestoroff looked at me almost with terror.

"You despise him?" she asked me.

I replied:

"I certainly do not admire him. Sometimes he makes me feel contempt for him, at other times pity."

She sprang to her feet as though urged by an irrepressible impulse:

"I despise," she said, "people who feel pity."

I replied calmly:

"I can quite understand your feeling like that."

"And you despise me!"

"No, Signora, far from it!"

She gazed at me for a while; smiled with a bitter disdain:

"You admire me, then?"

"I admire in you," was my answer, "what may perhaps arouse

contempt in other people; the contempt, for that matter, which you yourself wish to arouse in other people, so as not to provoke their pity."

She gazed at me more fixedly; came forward until we stood face to face, and asked me:

"And don't you mean by that, in a sense, that you also feel pity for me?"

"No, Signora. Admiration. Because you know how to punish yourself."

"Indeed? so you understand that?" she said, with a change of colour, and a shudder, as though she had felt a sudden chill.

"For some time past, Signora."

"In spite of everyone's despising me?"

"Perhaps it was just because everyone despised you."

"I too have been aware of it for some time," she said, holding out her hand and clasping mine tightly. "Thank you! But I can punish other people too, you know!" she at once added, in a threatening tone, withdrawing her hand and raising it in the air with outstretched forefinger. "I can punish other people too, without pity, because I have never sought any pity for myself and seek none now!"

She began to pace up and down the room, repeating:

"Without pity... without pity..."

Then, coming to a halt:

"You see?" she said, with an evil gleam in her eyes. "I do not admire you, for instance, who can overcome contempt with pity."

"In that case, you ought not to admire yourself either," I said with a smile. "Think for a moment, and then tell me why you invited me to call upon you this morning."

"You think it was out of pity for that... poor fellow, as you call him?"

"For him, or for some one else, or for yourself."

"Nothing of the sort!" her denial was emphatic. "No! No! You are mistaken! Not a scrap of pity for anyone! I wish to be what I am; I intend to remain myself. I asked you to come in

order that you might make him understand that I do not feel any pity for him and never shall!"

"Still, you do not wish to do him any injury."

"I do indeed wish to do him an injury, by leaving him where he is and as he is."

"But since you are so pitiless, would you not be doing him a greater injury if you were to call him back to you! Instead of driving him away..."

"That is because I wish, I myself, to remain as I am! I should be doing a greater injury to him, yes; but I should be conferring a benefit on myself, since I should take my revenge upon him instead of taking it upon myself. And what harm do you suppose could come to me from a man like him? I do not wish him any, you understand. Not because I feel any pity for him, but because I prefer not to feel any for myself. I am not interested in his sufferings, nor would it interest me to make him suffer more. He has had enough trouble. Let him go and weep somewhere else! I have no intention of weeping."

"I am afraid," I said, "that he has no longer any intention of weeping either."

"Then what does he intend to do?"

"Well! Being, as I have already told you, incapable of doing anything, in the state of mind in which he is at present, he might unfortunately become capable of anything."

"I am not afraid of him! The point is this, you see. I asked you to come and see me in order to tell you this, to make you understand this, so that you in turn may make him understand. I am not afraid that any harm can come to me from him, not even if he were to kill me, not even if, on his account, I had to go and end my days in prison! I am running that risk as well, you know! Deliberately, I have exposed myself to that risk as well. Because I know the man I have to deal with. And I am not afraid. I have let myself imagine that I was feeling a little afraid; imagining that, I have made an effort to send away from here a man who was threatening me, and everyone, with violence. It is not true. I have acted in cold blood, not

out of fear! Any evil, even that, would count for less with me. Another crime, imprisonment, death itself, would be lesser evils to me than what I am now suffering and wish to keep on suffering. So take care not to try and arouse any pity in me for myself or for him. I have none! If you have any for him, you who have so much pity for everyone, make him, make him go away! That is what I want from you, simply because I am not afraid of anything!"

As she made this speech, she shewed in her whole person a desperate rage at not really feeling what she would have liked to feel.

I remained for some time in a state of perplexity in which dismay, anguish and also admiration were mingled; then I threw up my hands, and, so as not to make a vain promise, told her of my plan of going down to the villa by Sorrento.

She stood and listened to me, recoiling upon herself, perhaps to deaden the smart that the memory of that villa and of the two disconsolate women caused her; shut her eyes sorrowfully; shook her head; said:

"You will gain nothing."

"Who knows?" I sighed. "One can at least try."

She pressed my hand:

"Perhaps," she said, "I too shall do something for you."

I gazed at her face, with more consternation than curiosity:

"For me? What can that be?"

She shrugged her shoulders; made an effort to smile:

"I said, _perhaps_.... Something. You will see."

"I thank you," I added. "But really I do not see what you can possibly do for me. I have always asked so little of life, and I mean now to ask less than ever. Indeed, I ask it for nothing more, Signora."

I said good-bye to her and left the house, my thoughts filled with this mysterious promise. What does she propose to do? In cold blood, as I supposed at the time, she has sent away Carlo Ferro, with the knowledge, which does not cause her the slightest alarm, either for herself or for him or for the rest

of us, that at any moment he may come rushing upon the scene here and commit a crime on his own account. How can she, knowing this, think of doing anything for me? What can she do? Where do I come in, in all this wretched entanglement? Does she intend to involve me in it in some way? With what object? She failed to get anything out of me, beyond an admission of my friendship long ago with Giorgio Mirelli and of a vague sentiment now for Signorina Luisetta. She cannot seize hold of me either by that friendship with a man who is now dead or by this sentiment which is already dying in me.

And yet, one never knows. I cannot set my mind at rest.

4.

The villa.

Was this it? Is it possible that this was it?

And yet, there was nothing altered about it, or very little.

Only that gate, a little higher, that pair of pillars, a little higher, replacing the little pillars of the old days, from one of which Grandfather Carlo had had the marble tablet with his name on it torn down.

But could this new gate have changed so completely the whole appearance of the old villa.

I saw that it was the same house, and it seemed to me impossible that it could be; I saw that it had remained much the same; why then did it appear a different house?

What a tragedy! The memory that seeks to live again, and cannot find its way among places that seem changed, that seem different, because our sentiments have changed, our sentiments are different. And yet I imagined that I had come hurrying to the villa with the sentiments of those days, the heart of long ago!

There it is. Knowing quite well that places have no other life, no other reality than that which we bestow on them, I saw myself obliged to admit with dismay, with infinite regret: "How I have changed!" The reality now is this. Something

different.

I rang the bell. A different sound. But now I no longer knew whether this were due to some change in myself or to there being a different bell. How depressing!

There appeared an old gardener, without a coat, his shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbows, with a watering-can in his hand and a brimless hat perched on the crown of his head like a priest's biretta.

"Donna Rosa Mirelli?"

"Who?"

"Is she dead?"

"Who do you mean?"

"Donna Rosa..."

"Ah, you want to know if she's dead? How should I know?"

"She doesn't live here any longer?"

"I don't know what Donna Rosa you're talking about. She doesn't live here. It's Pèrsico lives here, Don Filippo, the Cavaliere."

"Has he a wife? Donna Duccella?"

"No, Sir. He's a widower. He lives in town."

"Then there's no one living here?"

"There's myself here, Nicola Tavuso, the gardener."

The flowers in the borders on either side of the path from the gate to the house, red, yellow, white, hung motionless like discs of enamel in the limpid, silent air, dripping still from their recent bath. Flowers born yesterday, but upon those old borders. I looked at them: they disconcerted me; they said that it really was Tavuso who was living there now, as far as they were concerned, that he watered them well every morning, and that they were grateful to him for it: fresh, scentless, smiling with all those drops of water.

Fortunately, there appeared on the scene an old peasant woman, all breast and belly and hips, enormous under a big basket of greenstuff, with one eye shut, imprisoned beneath its swollen red lid, and the other keenly alert, clear, sky-blue, glazed with tears.

“Donna Rosa? Eh, the old mistress... Many’s the long year since she left here... Alive, yes, Sir, why not, poor soul? An old woman now... with the grandchild, yes, Sir, ... Donna Duccella, yes, Sir...”

Good folk! All for God... No use for this world, or anything. ... The house here they sold, yes, Sir, years ago, to Don Filippo the
’surer...”

“Pèrsico, the Cavaliere.”

“Go on, Don Nico, everyone knows Don Filippo! Now, Sir, you come along with me, and I’ll take you to Donna Rosa’s, next door to the New Church.”

Before leaving it, I took a final look at the villa. There was nothing left of it now; all of a sudden, nothing left; as though in a moment a cloud had passed from before my eyes. There it was: poverty-stricken, old, empty... nothing left! And in that case, perhaps,... Granny Rosa, Duccella... Nothing left, of them either? Phantoms of a dream, my sweet phantoms, my dear phantoms, and nothing more!

I felt chilled. A bare, dull, icy hardness. That stout peasant’s words: “Good folk! All for God... No use for this world...” I could feel the Church in them: hard, bare, icy. Across those green fields that smiled no longer... But then?

I allowed myself to be led away. I cannot say what long account followed of that Don Filippo, who was aptly named
’surer, because...

a never-ending because... the old Government ... not him, no, his father... a man of God too, he was, but... his father, or so the story went, at least. And with my weariness, in my weariness, as I went, all those impressions of a sordid reality, hard, bare, icy,... a donkey covered in flies, that refused to move, the squalid road, a crumbling wall, the fetid odour of the stout woman... Oh, what a temptation to dash to the station and take the train home again! Twice, three times, I was on the point of doing it; I checked myself; said to myself: “Let us see!”

A narrow stair, filthy, damp, almost in pitch darkness; and the old woman shouting to me from below:

“Straight on, keep straight on... The second floor... The bell is broken, Sir... Knock loud; she doesn't hear; knock loud.”

As though I were deaf too... “Here?” I said to myself as I climbed the stair. “How have they come down to this? Lost all their money? Perhaps, two women by themselves... That Don Filippo...”

On the landing of the second floor, two old doors, low in the lintel, freshly painted. By one hung the broken cord of its bell. The other had none. This one or that? I knocked first at this one, loud, with my fist, once, twice, thrice. I tried to pull the bell of the other: it did not ring. Was it this one, then? I knocked at it, loud, three times, four times... No answer! But how in the world? Was Duccella deaf too? Or was she not living with her grandmother? I knocked again, more loudly. I was turning to go, when I heard on the stair the heavy step and breathing of somebody coming up. A short, thickset woman, in one of those garments that signify devotion, with the penitential cord round her waist: a coffee-coloured garment, of devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Over her head and shoulders a *_spagnoletta_*, of black lace; in her hand, a fat prayer-book and the key of the house.

She stopped on the landing and looked at me with pale, lifeless eyes from a fat white face ending in a flaccid chin: on her upper lip, here and there, at the corners of her mouth, a few hairs sprouted. Duccella.

I had had enough; I wished only to make my escape! Ah, if only she had remained with that apathetic, stupid air with which she stopped short in front of me, still a little breathless, on the landing! But no: she wanted to entertain me, she wanted to be polite—she, now, like that—with those eyes that were no longer hers, with that fat, colourless nun's face, with that short, stout body, and a voice, a voice and a kind of smile which I did not recognise: entertainment, compliments, ceremonies, as though I were shewing her a great

condescension; and she was absolutely determined that I should come in and see her grandmother, who would be so delighted at the honour...

why, yes, why, yes... "Step inside, please, step inside..." To remove her from my path I would have given her a shove, even at the risk of sending her flying downstairs! What a flabby horror! What an object! That deaf old woman, doddering with age, without a tooth in her head, with her pointed chin that protruded horribly towards the tip of her nose, chewing and mumbling, and her pallid tongue shewing between her flaccid, wrinkled lips, and those huge spectacles, monstrously enlarging her sightless eyes, scarred by an operation for cataract, between their sparse lashes, long as the feelers of an insect!

"You have made a position for yourself." (With the soft Neapolitan z-_posi-szi-o-ne_.)

She could think of nothing else to say to me.

I made my escape without its ever having occurred to me for a moment to suggest the plan for which I had come. What was I to say? What was there to do? Why ask them to tell me their story? If they had really fallen into poverty, as might be supposed from the appearance of the house? Perfectly content with everything, stolid and happy with God!

Oh, what a horrible thing faith is! Duccella, the blushing flower...

Granny Rosa, the garden of the villa with its jasmynes...

In the train, I felt as though I were rushing towards madness, through the night. In what world was I? My travelling companion, a man of middle age, dark, with oval eyes, like discs of enamel, and hair that gleamed with oil, he belonged certainly to this world; firm and well established in the consciousness of his own calm and well cared for beastliness, he understood it all to perfection, without worrying about anything; he knew quite well all that it concerned him to know, where he was going, why he was travelling, the house at

which he would arrive, the supper that was being prepared for him. But I? Was I of the same world? His journey and mine... his night and mine... No, I had no time, no world, no anything. The train was his; he was travelling in it. How on earth did I come to be travelling in it also?

What was I doing in the world in which he lived? How, in what respect was this night mine, when I had no means of living it, nothing to do with it? He had his night and all the time he wanted, that middle-aged man who was now twisting his neck about with signs of discomfort in his immaculate starched collar. No, no world, no time, nothing: I stood apart from everything, absent from myself and from life; and no longer knew where I was nor why I was there. Images I carried in me, not my own, of things and people; images, aspects, faces, memories of people and things which had never existed in reality, outside me, in the world which that gentleman saw round him and could touch. I had thought that I saw them, and could touch them also, but no, they were all imagination! I had never found them again, because they had never existed: phantoms, a dream... But how could they have entered my mind? From where? Why? Was I there too, perhaps, then? Was there an I there then that now no longer existed? No; the middle-aged gentleman opposite to me told me, no: that other people existed, each in his own way and with his own space and time: I, no, I was not there; albeit, not being there, I should have found it hard to say where I really was and what I was, being thus without time or space.

I no longer understood anything. And I understood nothing when, arriving in Rome and coming to the house, about ten o'clock at night, I found in the dining-room, as gay as though nothing had happened, as though a new life had begun during my absence, Fabrizio Cavalea, a Doctor once more and restored to the bosom of his family, Aldo Nuti, Signorina Luisetta and Signora Nene, sitting round the table.

How? Why? What had happened?

I could not get rid of the impression that they were sitting

there, gay and reconciled to one another, to make a fool of me, to reward me with the sight of their gaiety for the trouble that I had taken on their behalf; not only this, but that, knowing the state of mind in which I should return from the expedition, they had clubbed together to confound me utterly, making me find here also a reality such as I should never have expected.

More than any of the rest she, Signorina Luisetta, filled me with scorn, Signorina Luisetta who was impersonating Duccella in love, that Duccella, the blushing flower, of whom I had so often spoken to her! I would have liked to shout in her face how I had found her that afternoon, down at Sorrento, that Duccella, and to bid her give up this play-acting, which was an unworthy and grotesque contamination! And he too, the young man, who seemed by a miracle to be the same young man of years ago, I would have liked to shout in his face how and where I had found Duccella and Granny Rosa.

But good souls all of you! Down there, those two poor women, happy in God, and you happy here in the devil! Dear Cavalea, why yes, changed back not merely into a Doctor, but into a boy, a bridegroom, sitting by his bride! No, thank you: there is no place for me among you: don't get up; don't disturb yourselves: I am neither hungry nor thirsty! I can do without everything, I can. I have wasted upon you a little of what is of no use to me; you know it; a little of that heart which is of no use to me; because to me only my hand is of use: there is no need, therefore, to thank me! Indeed, you must excuse me if I have disturbed you. The fault is mine, for trying to interfere. Keep your seats, don't get up, good night.

1915/1925 – Shoot!

(The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator)

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In Italiano – Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio, operatore

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