

Shoot! – Book VII

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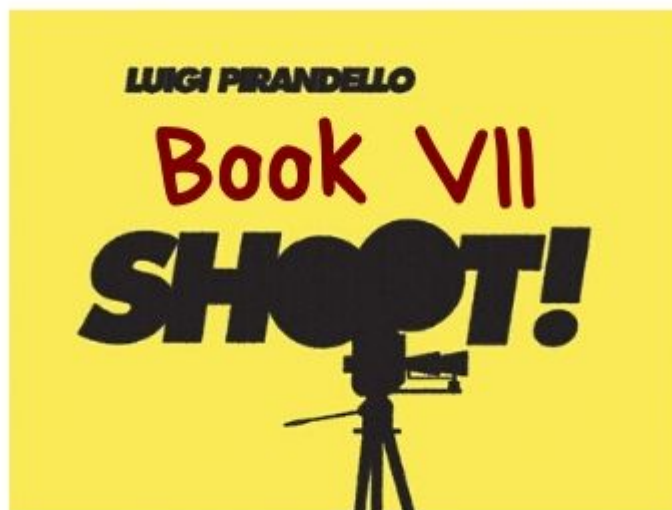
In Italiano – [Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio, operatore](#)

Introduction

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Translated from the Italian by C. K. Scott Moncrieff
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Shoot! – Book VII

1.

I understand, at last.

Upset? No, why should I be? So much water has passed under the bridges; the past is dead and distant. Life is here now, this life: a different life. Lawns, round about, and stages, the buildings miles away, almost in the country, between green grass and blue sky, of a cinematograph company. And she is here, an actress now... He an actor too? Just fancy! Why, then, they must be colleagues? Splendid; I am so glad...

Everything perfect, everything smooth as oil. Life. That rustle of her blue silk skirt, now, with that curious white lace jacket, and that little winged hat like the helmet of the god of commerce, on her copper-coloured hair... yes. Life. A little heap of gravel turned up by the point of her sunshade; and an interval of silence, With her eyes wandering, fixed on the point of her sunshade that is turning up that little heap of gravel.

“What? Yes, of course, dear: a great bore.”

This is undoubtedly what must have happened yesterday, during my absence. The Nestoroff, with those wandering eyes of hers, strangely wide open, must have gone to the Kosmograph on purpose, in the hope of meeting him; she must have strolled up to him with an indifferent air, as one goes up to a friend, an acquaintance whom one happens to meet again after many years, and the butterfly, without the least suspicion of the spider, must have begun to flap his wings, quite exultant.

But how in the world did not Signorina Luisetta notice anything?

Well, that is a satisfaction which Signora Nestoroff must have had to forego. Yesterday, Signorina Luisetta, to celebrate her father's

return home, did not go with Signor Nuti to the Kosmograph. And so Signora Nestoroff cannot have had the pleasure of shewing this proud young lady who, the day before, had declined her invitation, how she, at any moment, whenever the fancy took her, could tear from the side of any proud young lady and recapture for herself all the mad young gentlemen who threatened tragedies, _pst_!, like that, by holding up a finger, and at once tame them, intoxicate them with the rustle of a silk skirt and a little heap of gravel turned up with the point of a sunshade. A bore, yes, a great bore unquestionably, because to this pleasure which she has had to forego Signora Nestoroff attached great importance.

That evening, knowing nothing of what had happened, Signorina Luisetta saw the young gentleman return home completely transformed, radiant with happiness. How was she to suppose that this transformation, this radiance could be due to a meeting with the Nestoroff, if, whenever she thinks with terror of that meeting, she sees red, black, confusion, madness, tragedy? And so this change, this radiance, was the effect of Papa's return home on him also? Well, that it is of any great importance to him, her father's return home, Signorina Luisetta cannot suppose, no; but that he should take pleasure in it, and seek to attune himself to other people's rejoicing, why in the world not?

How else is his jubilation to be explained? And it is something to be thankful for; it is a thing to rejoice in, because this jubilation

shews that his heart has become lighter, more open, so that he can readily assimilate the joy of other people.

These must certainly have been the thoughts of Signorina Luisetta. Yesterday; not to-day.

To-day she came to the Kosmograph with me, her face clouded. She had found, greatly to her surprise, that Signor Nuti had already left the house at an early hour, while it was still dark. She did not wish to display, as we went along, resentment and alarm, after the spectacle offered me last night of her gaiety; and so asked me where I had been yesterday and what I had done. "I? Oh, only a little pleasure jaunt..." And had I enjoyed myself? "Oh, immensely, to begin with at least. Afterwards..." The way things happen. We make all the arrangements for a pleasure party; we imagine that we have thought of everything, have taken every precaution so that the excursion may be a success, with no unfortunate incident to mar it; and yet there is always something, one of the many things, of which we have not thought; one thing escapes us... well, for instance, suppose there is a family with a number of children, who propose to go and spend a fine

summer day picnicking in the country, there are the second child's shoes, in one of which there is a nail, a mere nothing, a tiny nail, inside, sticking up in the heel, which needs hammering down. The mother remembered it, as soon as she got out of bed; but afterwards, you know what happens—with everything to get ready for the excursion, she forgot all about it. And that pair of shoes, with their little tongues sticking up like the pricked ears of a wily rabbit, standing in the row among all the other pairs, cleaned and polished and all ready for the children to put on, wait there and seem to be gloating in silence over the trick they are going to play on the mother who has forgotten all about them and who now, at the last moment, is in a greater bustle than ever, in wild confusion, because the father is down below at the foot of the stair shouting to her to make haste and all the children round her shout to her to make haste, they are so impatient. That pair of shoes, as the mother takes them to thrust them hurriedly on the child's feet, say to her with a mocking laugh:

“Ah yes, mother dear; but us, you know? You have forgotten about us; and you'll see that we shall spoil the whole day for you: when you are half way there that little nail will begin to hurt your child's foot and make it cry and limp.”

Well, something of that sort happened to me too. No, not a nail to be hammered down in my boot. Another little detail had escaped my memory... “What?” Nothing: another little detail. I did not wish to tell her. Another thing, Signorina Luisetta, which perhaps had long ago broken down in me.

To say that Signorina Luisetta paid me any close attention would not be true. And, as we went on our way, while I allowed my lips to go on speaking, I was thinking:

“Ah, you are not interested, my dear child, in what I am telling you? My misadventure leaves you indifferent, does it? Well, you shall see with what an air of indifference I, in my turn, to pay you back in your own coin, am going to receive

the unpleasant surprise that is in store for you, as soon as you enter the Kosmogroph me: you shall see!"

In fact, before we had advanced five yards across the tree-shaded lawn in front of the first building of the Kosmogroph, there we saw, strolling side by side, like the dearest of friends, Signor Nuti and Signora Nestoroff: she, with her sunshade open, resting upon her shoulder, and twirling the handle.

What a look Signorina Luisetta gave me! And I:

"You see! They are taking a quiet stroll. She is twirling her sunshade."

So pale, however, so pale had the poor child turned, that I was afraid of her falling to the ground, in a faint: instinctively I put out my hand to support her arm; she withdrew her arm angrily, and looked me straight in the face. Evidently the suspicion flashed across her mind that it was my doing, a plot on my part (by arrangement, very possibly, with Polacco), that quiet and friendly reconciliation of Nuti and Signora Nestoroff, the first-fruits of the visit paid by me to that lady two days ago, and perhaps also of my mysterious absence yesterday. It must have seemed to her a vile mockery, all this secret machination, as it entered her mind in a flash. To make her dread the imminence, day after day, of a tragedy, should those two meet; to make her conceive such a terror of their meeting; to make her suffer such agony in order to pacify his ravings with a piteous deception, which had cost her so dear, and to what purpose! To offer her as a final reward the delicious picture of those two taking their quiet morning stroll under the trees on the lawn? Oh, villainy! Was it for this? For the amusement of laughing at a poor child who had taken it all seriously, plunged into the midst of this sordid, vulgar intrigue? She looked for nothing pleasant, in the absurd, miserable conditions of her life; but why this as well? Why mockery also? It was vile!

All this I read in the poor child's eyes. Could I prove to her, there and then, that her suspicion was unjust, that life is like that—to-day more than ever it was before—made to offer such spectacles; and that I myself was in no way to blame?

I had hardened my heart; I was glad that she should pay for the injustice of her suspicion by her suffering at that spectacle, at the sight of those people, to whom I as well as she, unmasked, had given something of ourselves, something that was now smarting, bruised and wounded, inside us. But we deserved it! And now, it pleased me to have her at this moment as my companion, while those two strolled up and down there without so much as seeing us. Indifference, indifference, Signorina Luisetta, there you are!

"If you will excuse me," it occurred to me to say to her, "I shall go and get my camera, and take my place here, as is my duty, impassive." And I felt a strange smile on my lips, which was almost the grin of a dog when he bares his teeth at some secret thought. I was looking meanwhile towards the door of the building beyond, from which emerged, coming towards us, Polacco, Bertini and Fantappiè. Suddenly there occurred a thing which I ought really to have expected, which justified Signorina Luisetta in trembling so violently and rebuked me for having chosen to remain indifferent. My mask of indifference I was obliged to throw aside in a moment, at the threat of a danger which did really seem to all of us imminent and terrible. I caught the first glimpse of it in the appearance of Polacco, who had come close up to us with Bertini and Fantappiè. They were talking among themselves, evidently of that couple who were still strolling beneath the trees, and all three were laughing at some witticism that had fallen from Fantappiè, when all of a sudden they stopped short in front of us with faces of chalk, staring eyes, all three of them. But most of all in the face of Polacco I read terror. I turned to look over my shoulder: Carlo Ferro!

He was coming up behind us, still with his travelling cap on

his head, as he had left the train a few minutes earlier. And those two, meanwhile, continued to stroll up and down, together, without the least suspicion, under the trees. Did he see them! I cannot say. Fantappiè had the presence of mind to shout:

“Hallo, Carlo Ferro!”

The Nestoroff turned round, left her companion standing, and then one saw—free of charge—the moving spectacle of a lion-tamer who amid the terror of the spectators advances to meet an infuriated animal. Calmly she advanced, without haste, still balancing her open sunshade on her shoulder. And she had a smile on her lips, which said to us, without her deigning to look at us: “What are you afraid of, you idiots! I am here, a’nt I?” And a look in her eyes which I shall never forget, the look of one who knows that everyone must see that no fear can find a place in a person who looks straight ahead and advances so. The effect of that look on the savage face, the disordered person, the excited gait of Carlo Ferro was remarkable. We did not see his face, we saw his body grow limp and his pace slacken steadily as the fascination drew nearer to him. And the one sign that she too must be feeling somewhat agitated was this: she began to address him in French.

None of us cast a glance beyond her, where Aldo Nuti remained by himself, planted among the trees, but suddenly I became aware that one of us, she, Signorina Luisetta, was looking in that direction, was looking at him, and had perhaps looked at nothing else, as though for her the terror lay there and not in the two at whom the rest of us were gazing, in dismayed suspense.

But nothing occurred for the moment. To break the storm, making a great din, there dashed upon the lawn, in the nick of time, Commendator Borgalli accompanied by various members of the firm and employees from the manager’s office. Bertini and Polacco, who were with us, were swept away; but the managing

director's fierce reproaches were aimed also at the other two producers who were absent. The work was going to pieces! No control of production; the wildest confusion; a perfect Tower of Babel! Fifteen, twenty subjects left in the air; the companies scattered here, there and everywhere, when it had been announced, weeks ago, that they must be assembled and ready to get to work on the tiger film, on which thousands and thousands of lire had been spent! Some were off to the hills, some to the sea; eating their heads off! What was the use of keeping the tiger there!

There was still the whole part of the actor who was to kill it> wanting? And where was the actor? Oh, he had just arrived, had he? How was that? Where had he been?

Actors, supers, scene-painters had come pouring in a crowd from every direction at the shouts of Commendator Borgalli, who had the satisfaction of measuring thus the extent of his own authority, and the fear and respect in which he was held, by the silence in which all these people stood round and then dispersed, when he concluded his harangue with the words:

"To your work! Get along back to work!"

There vanished from the lawn, as though it had been first of all submerged by this tide of people, then carried away by their ebb, every trace of the—shall we say—dramatic situation of a moment earlier; there, in the foreground, the Nestoroff and Carlo Ferro; beyond them, Nuti, solitary, apart, under the trees. The ground lay empty before us. I heard Signorina Luisetta sobbing by my side:

"Oh, heavens, oh, heavens," and she wrung her hands. "Oh, heavens, what next? What will happen next?"

I looked at her with irritation, but tried, nevertheless, to comfort her:

"Why, what do you want to happen? Keep calm! Didn't you see? All arranged beforehand. ... At least, that is my impression. Yes, of course, keep calm! This surprise visit from Ferro... I bet she knew all about it; I shouldn't be surprised if she telegraphed to him yesterday to come; why yes, of course, to

let him find her here engaged in a friendly conversation with Signor Nuti. You may be sure that is what it is." "But he? He?"

"Who is _he_? Nuti?"

"If it is all a trick played by those two..."

"You are afraid he may notice it?"

"Yes! Yes!"

And the poor child began again to wring her hands.

"Well? And what if he does notice it?" said I. "You needn't worry yourself; he won't do anything. Depend upon it, this was arranged beforehand too."

"By whom? By her? By that woman?"

"By that woman. She must first have made quite certain, before talking to him, that the other man would be able to turn up in time, without any danger to anyone; keep calm! Otherwise, Ferro would not have come upon the scene."

We were quits. My statement embodied a profound contempt for Nuti; if Signorina Luisetta desired peace of mind, she was bound to accept it. She did so long to secure peace of mind, Signorina Luisetta; but on these terms, no; she would not. She shook her head violently: no, no.

There was nothing then to be done! But as a matter of fact, notwithstanding my faith in the Nestoroff's cold perspicacity, in her power, when I reminded myself of Nuti's desperate ravings, I did not feel any too certain myself that it was with him that we should

concern ourselves. But this thought increased my irritation, already moved by the spectacle of that poor, terrified child. Despite my resolution to place and keep all these people in front of my machine as food for its hunger while I stood impassively turning the handle, I saw myself too obliged to continue to take an interest in them, to occupy myself with their affairs. There came back to me also the threats, the fierce protestations of the Nestoroff, that she feared nothing from any man, Because any other evil—a fresh crime,

imprisonment, death itself—she would reckon as less than the evil which she was suffering in secret and preferred to endure. Had she perhaps suddenly grown tired of enduring it? Could this be the reason of her deciding yesterday, during my absence, to take the first step towards Nuti, in contradiction of what she had said to me the day before?

“No pity,” she had said to me, “neither for myself nor for him!”

Had she suddenly felt pity for herself? Not for him, certainly! But pity for herself means to her extricating herself by any means in her power, even at the cost of a crime, from the punishment she has inflicted on herself by living with Carlo Ferro. Suddenly making up her mind, she has gone to meet Nuti and has made Carlo Ferro return.

What does she want? What is going to happen next?

This is what happened, in the meantime, at midday beneath the pergola of the tavern, where—dressed some of them as Indians and others as English tourists—a crowd of actors and actresses from the four companies had assembled. All of them were or pretended to be infuriated and upset by Commendator Borgalli's outburst that morning, and had for some time been taunting Carlo Ferro, letting him clearly understand that they were indebted to him for that outburst, he having first of all advanced all those silly claims and then tried to back out of the part allotted to him in the tiger film, and having left Rome, as though there were really a great risk attached to the killing of an animal cowed by all those months of captivity: an insurance for one hundred thousand lire, agreements, conditions, etc. Carlo Ferro was seated at a table, a little way off, with the Nestoroff. His face was yellow; it was quite evident that he was making an enormous effort to control himself; we all expected him at any moment to break out, to turn upon us. We were, therefore, left speechless at first when, instead of him, another man, to whom no one had given a thought, broke out all of a sudden and turned upon him, going up to the table at which Ferro and the Nestoroff were sitting.

It was he, Nuti, as pale as death. In a silence that throbbed with a violent tension, a faint cry of terror was heard, to which Varia Nestoroff promptly replied by laying her hand, imperiously, upon Carlo Ferro's arm.

Nuti said, looking Ferro straight in the face:

"Are you prepared to give up your place and your part to me? I promise before everyone here to take it on unconditionally."

Carlo Ferro did not spring to his feet nor did he fly at the tempter.

To the general amazement he sank down, sprawled awkwardly in his chair; leaned his head to one side, as though to look up at the speaker, and before replying raised the arm upon which the Nestoroff's hand was resting, saying to her:

"Please..."

Then, turning to Nuti:

"You? My part? Why, I shall be delighted, my dear Sir. Because I am a fearful coward ... you wouldn't believe how frightened I am. Delighted, my dear Sir, delighted!"

And he laughed, as I never saw a man laugh before!

His laughter made us all shudder, and, what with this general shudder and the whiplash of his laughter, Nuti was left quite helpless, his mind certainly vacillating from the impulse which had driven him to face his rival and had now collapsed, in the face of this awkward and teasingly submissive reception. He looked round him, and then, all of a sudden, at the sight of that pale, puzzled face, everyone began to laugh at him, broke into peals of loud, irrepressible laughter. The painful tension was broken in this way, in this enormous laugh of relief, at the challenger's expense. Exclamations of derision sounded here and there, like jets of water amid the clamour of the laughter:

"He's cut a pretty figure!" "Caught in the trap!" "Like a mouse!"

Nuti would have done better to join in the laughter as well; but, most unfortunately, he chose to persist in the ridiculous

part he had adopted, looking round for some one to whom he might cling, to keep himself afloat in this cyclone of hilarity, and stammered:

“Then... then, you agree?... I am to play the part... you agree!”

But even I myself, however reluctantly, at once took my eyes from him to look at the Nestoroff, whose dilated pupils gleamed with an evil light.

2.

Trapped. That is all. This and this only is what Nestoroff wished—that it should be he who entered the cage.

With what object? That seems to me easily understood, after the way in which she has arranged things: that is to say that everyone, first of all, heaping contempt upon Carlo Ferro whom she had persuaded or forced to go away, should insist that there was no danger involved in entering the cage, so that afterwards the challenge of Nuti's offer to enter it should seem all the more ridiculous, and, by the laughter with which that challenge was greeted, the other's self-esteem might emerge if not unscathed still with the least possible damage; with no damage at all, indeed, since, with the malign satisfaction which people feel on seeing a poor bird caught in a snare, that the snare in question was not a pleasant thing everyone is now prepared to admit; all the more credit, therefore, to Ferro who has managed to free himself from it at this sparrow's expense. In short, this to my mind is clearly what she wished: to take in Nuti, by shewing him her heartfelt determination to spare Ferro even a trifling inconvenience and the mere shadow of a remote danger, such as that of entering a cage and firing at an animal which everyone says is cowed by all these months of captivity. There: she has taken him neatly by the nose and amid universal laughter has led him into the cage.

Even the most moral of moralists, unintentionally, between the lines of their fables, allow us to observe their keen delight

in the cunning of the fox, at the expense of the wolf or the rabbit or the hen: and heaven only knows what the fox represents in those fables! The moral to be drawn from them is always this: that the loss and the ridicule are borne by the foolish, the timid, the simple, and that the thing to be valued above all is therefore cunning, even when the fox fails to reach the grapes and says that they are sour. A fine moral! But this is a trick that the fox is always playing on the moralists, who, do what they may, can never succeed in making him cut a sorry figure.

Have you laughed at the fable of the fox and the grapes? I never did. Because no wisdom has ever seemed to me wiser than this, which teaches us to cure ourselves of every desire by despising its object.

This, you understand, I am now saying of myself, who would like to be a fox and am not. I cannot find it in me to say sour grapes to Signorina Luisetta. And that poor child, whose heart I have not been able to reach, here she is doing everything in her power to make me, in her company, lose my reason, my calm impassivity, abandon the fine wise course which I have repeatedly declared my intention of following, in short all my boasted inanimate silence. I should like to despise her, Signorina Luisetta, when I see her throwing herself away like this upon that fool; I cannot. The poor child can no longer sleep, and comes to tell me so every morning in my room, with eyes that change in colour, now a deep blue, now a pale green, with pupils that now dilate with terror, now contract to a pair of pin-points which seem stabbed by the most acute anguish.

I say to her: "You don't sleep? Why not?" prompted by a malicious desire, which I would like to repress but cannot, to annoy her. Her youth, the calm weather ought surely to coax her to sleep. No? Why not? I feel a strong inclination to force her to tell me that she lies awake because she is afraid that he... Indeed? And then: "No, no, sleep sound, everything is going well, going perfectly. You should see the energy with

which he has set to work to interpret his part in the tiger film! And he does it really well, because as a boy he used to say that if his grandfather had allowed it, he would have gone upon the stage; and he would not have been wrong! A marvellous natural aptitude; a true thoroughbred distinction; the perfect composure of an English gentleman following the perfidious Miss on her travels in the East! And you ought to see the courteous submission with which he accepts advice from the professional actors, from the producers Bertini and Polacco, and how delighted he is with their praise! So there is nothing to be afraid of, Signorina. He is perfectly calm....”

“How do you account for that?” “Why, in this way, perhaps, that having never done anything, lucky fellow, in his life, now that, by force of circumstances, he has set himself to do something, and the very thing that at one time he would have liked to do, he has taken a fancy to it, finds distraction in it, flatters his vanity with it.”

No! Signorina Luisetta says no, persists in repeating no, no, no; that it does not seem to her possible; that she cannot believe it; that he must be brooding over some act of violence, which he is keeping dark.

Nothing could be easier, when a suspicion of this sort has taken root, than to find a corroborating significance in every trifling action. And Signorina Luisetta finds so many! And she comes and tells me about them every morning in my room: “He is writing,” “He is frowning,” “He never looked up,” “He forgot to say good morning...”

“Yes, Signorina, and what about this; he blew his nose with his left hand this morning, instead of using his right!”

Signorina Luisetta does not laugh: she looks at me, frowning, to see whether I am serious: then goes away in a dudgeon and sends to my room Cavalea, her father, who (I can see) is doing everything in his power, poor man, to overcome in my presence the consternation which his daughter has succeeded in conveying to him in its strongest form, trying to rise to abstract considerations.

"Women!" he begins, throwing out his hands. "You, fortunately for yourself (and may it always remain so, I wish with, all my heart, Signor Gubbio!) have never encountered the Enemy upon your path. But look at me! What fools the men are who, when they hear woman called 'the enemy,' at once retort: 'But what about your mother? Your sisters? Your daughters?' as though to a man, who in that case is a son, a brother, a father, those were women! Women, indeed! One's mother? You have to consider your mother in relation to your father, and your sisters or daughters in relation to their husbands; then the true woman, the enemy will emerge! Is there anything dearer to me than my poor darling child? Yet I have not the slightest hesitation in admitting, Signor Gubbio, that even she, undoubtedly, even my Sesè is capable of becoming, like all other women when face to face with man, the enemy. And there is no goodness of heart, there is no submissiveness that can restrain them, believe me! When, at a turn in the road, you meet her, the particular woman, to whom I refer, the enemy: then one of two things must happen: either you kill her, or you have to submit, as I have done. But how many men are capable of submitting as I have done? Grant me at least the meagre satisfaction of saying very few, Signor Gubbio, very few!"

I reply that I entirely agree with him.

Whereupon: "You agree?" asks Cavalena, with a surprise which he makes haste to conceal, fearing lest from his surprise I may divine his purpose. "You agree?"

And he looks me timidly in the face, as though seeking the right moment to descend, without marring our agreement, from the abstract consideration to the concrete instance. But here I quickly stop him.

"Good Lord, but why," I ask him, "must you believe in such a desperate resolution on Signora Nestoroff's part to be Signor Nuti's enemy!"

"What's that? But surely? Don't you think so? But she is! She is the enemy!" exclaims Cavalena. "That seems to me to be

unquestionable!"

"And why?" I persisted. "What seems to me unquestionable is that she has no desire to be his friend or his enemy or anything at all."

"But that is just the point!" Cavalena interrupts me. "Surely; or do you mean that we ought to consider woman in and by herself? Always in relation to a man, Signor Gubbio! The greater enemy, in certain cases, the more indifferent she is! And in this case, indifference, really, at this stage? After all the harm that she has done him? And she doesn't stop at that; she must make a mock of him, too. Really!"

I gaze at him for a while in silence, then with a sigh return to my original question:

"Very good. But why must you now believe that the indifference and mockery of Signora Nestoroff have provoked Signor Nuti to (what shall I say?) anger, scorn, violent plans of revenge? On what do you base your argument? He certainly shews no sign of it! He keeps perfectly calm, he is looking forward with evident pleasure to his part as an English gentleman..."

"It is not natural! It is not natural!" Cavalena protests, shrugging his shoulders. "Believe me, Signor Gubbio, it is not natural! My daughter is right. If I saw him cry with rage or grief, rave, writhe, waste away, I should say amen. You see, he is tending towards one or other alternative."

"You mean?"

"The alternatives between which a man can choose when he is face to face with the enemy. Do you follow me? But this calm, no, it is not natural! We have seen him go mad here, for this woman, raving mad; and now... Why, it is not natural! It is not natural!"

At this point I make a sign with my finger, which poor Cavalena does not at first understand.

"What do you mean?" he asks me.

I repeat the sign; then, in the most placid of tones:

"Go up higher, my friend, go up higher..." "Higher... what do you mean?"

"A step higher, Signor Fabrizio; rise a step above these

abstract considerations, of which you began by giving me a specimen. Believe me, if you are in search of comfort, it is the only way. And it is the fashionable way, too, to-day."

"And what is that?" asks Cavalena, bewildered.

To which I:

"Escape, Signor Fabrizio, escape; fly from the drama! It is a fine thing, and it is the fashion, too, I tell you. Let yourself e-va-po-rate in (shall we say?) lyrical expansion, above the brutal necessities of life, so ill-timed and out of place and illogical; up, a step above every reality that threatens to plant itself, in its petty crudity, before our eyes. Imitate, in short, the songbirds in cages, Signor Fabrizio, which do indeed, as they hop from perch to perch, cast their droppings here and there, but afterwards spread their wings and fly: there, you see, prose and poetry; it is the fashion. Whenever things go amiss, whenever two people, let us say, come to blows or draw their knives, up, look above you, study the weather, watch the swallows dart by, or the bats if you like, count the passing clouds; note in what phase the moon is, and if the stars are of gold or silver. You will be considered original, and will appear to enjoy a vaster understanding of life."

Cavalena stares at me open-eyed: perhaps he thinks me mad.

Then: "Ah," he says, "to be able to do that!"

"The easiest thing in the world, Signor Fabrizio! What does it require? As soon as a drama begins to take shape before you, as soon as things promise to assume a little consistency and are about to spring up before you solid, concrete, menacing, just liberate from within you the madman, the frenzied poet, armed with a suction pump; begin to pump out of the prose of that mean and sordid reality a little bitter poetry, and there you are!"

"But the heart?" asks Cavalena.

"What heart?"

"Good God, the heart! One would need to be without one!"

"The heart, Signor Fabrizio! Nothing of the sort."

Foolishness. What do you suppose it matters to my heart if Tizio weeps or Cajo weds, if Sempronio slays Filano, and so on? I escape, I avoid the drama, I expand, look, I expand!"

What do expand more and more are the eyes of poor Cavaleña. I rise to my feet and say to him in conclusion:

"In a word, to your consternation and that of your daughter, Signor Fabrizio, my answer is this: that I do not wish to hear any more; I am weary of the whole business, and should like to send you all to blazes. Signor Fabrizio, tell your daughter this: my job is to be an operator, there!"

And off I go to the Kosmograph.

3.

And now, God willing, we have reached the end. Nothing remains now save the final picture of the killing of the tiger.

The tiger: yes, I prefer, if I must be distressed, to be distressed over her; and I go to pay her a visit, standing for the last time in front of her cage. She has grown used to seeing me, the beautiful creature, and does not stir. Only she wrinkles her brows a little, annoyed; but she endures the sight of me as she endures the burden of this sunlit silence, lying heavy round about her, which here in the cage is impregnated with a strong bestial odour. The sunlight enters the cage and she shuts her eyes, perhaps to dream, perhaps so as not to see descending 'upon her the stripes of shadow cast by the iron bars. Ah, she must be tremendously bored with life also; bored, too, with my pity for her; and I believe that to make it cease, with a fit reward, she would gladly devour me. This desire, which she realises that the bars prevent her from satisfying, makes her heave a deep sigh; and since she is lying outstretched, her languid head drooping on one paw, I see, when she sighs, a cloud of dust rise from the floor of the cage. Her sigh, really distresses me, albeit I understand why she has emitted it; it is her sorrowful recognition of the deprivation to which she has been condemned of her natural

right to devour man, whom she has every reason to regard as her enemy.

“To-morrow,” I tell her. “To-morrow, my dear, this torment will be at an end. It is true that this torment still means something to you, and that, when it is over, nothing will matter to you any more. But if you have to choose between this torment and nothing, perhaps nothing is preferable! A captive like this, far from your savage haunts, powerless to tear anyone to pieces, or even to frighten him, what sort of tiger are you? Hark! They are making ready the big cage out there... You are accustomed already to hearing these hammer-blows, and pay no attention to them. In this respect, you see, you are more fortunate than man: man may think, when he hears the hammer-blows:

‘There, those are for me; that is the undertaker, getting my coffin ready.’ You are already there, in your coffin, and do not know it: it will be a far larger cage than this; and you will have the comfort of a touch of local colour there too: it will represent a glade in a forest. The cage in which you now are will be carried out there and placed so that it opens into the other. A stage hand will climb on the roof of this cage, and pull up the door, while another man opens the door of the other cage; and you will then steal in between the tree trunks, cautious and wondering. But immediately you will notice a curious ticking noise. Nothing! It will be I, winding my machine on its tripod; yes, I shall be in the cage too, beside you; but don’t pay any attention to me! Do you see? Standing a little way in front of me is another man, another man who takes aim at you and fires, ah! there you are on the ground, a dead weight, brought down in your spring... I shall come up to you; with no risk to the machine, I shall register your last convulsions, and so good-bye!”

If it ends like that...

This evening, on coming out of the Positive Department, where, in view of Borgalli’s urgency, I have been lending a hand

myself in the developing and joining of the sections of this monstrous film, I saw Aldo Nuti advancing upon me with the unusual intention of accompanying me home. I at once observed that he was trying, or rather forcing himself not to let me see that he had something to say to me.

"Are you going home?"

"Yes."

"So am I."

When we had gone some distance he asked:

"Have you been in the rehearsal theatre to-day?"

"No. I've been working downstairs, in the dark room."

Silence for a while. Then he made a painful effort to smile, with what he intended for a smile of satisfaction.

"They were trying my scenes. Everyone was pleased with them. I should never have imagined that they would come out so well. One especially. I wish you could have seen it."

"Which one?"

"The one that shews me by myself for a minute, close up, with a finger on my lips, like this, engaged in thinking. It lasts a little too long, perhaps... my face is a little too prominent ... and my eyes... You can count my eyelashes. I thought I should never disappear from the screen."

I turned to look at him; but he at once took refuge in an obvious reflexion:

"Yes!" he said. "Curious the effect our own appearance has on us in a photograph, even on a plain card, when we look at it for the first time. Why is it?"

"Perhaps," I answered, "because we feel that we are fixed there in a moment of time which no longer exists in ourselves; which will remain, and become steadily more remote."

"Perhaps!" he sighed. "Always more remote for us..."

"No," I went on, "for the picture as well. The picture ages too, just as we gradually age. It ages, although it is fixed there for ever in

that moment; it ages young, if we are young, because that young man in the picture becomes older year by year with us,

in us.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“It is quite easy to understand, if you will think a little. Just listen: the time, there, of the picture, does not advance, does not keep moving on, hour by hour, with us, into the future; you expect it to remain fixed at that point, but it is moving too, in the opposite direction; it recedes farther and farther into the past, that time.

Consequently the picture itself is a dead thing which as time goes on recedes gradually farther into the past: and the younger it is the older and more remote it becomes.”

“Ah, yes, I see what you mean... Yes, yes,” he said. “But there is something sadder still. A picture that has grown old young and empty.”

“How do you mean, empty?”

“The picture of somebody who has died young.”

I again turned to look at him; but he at once added:

“I have a portrait of my father, who died quite young, at about my age; so long ago that I don’t remember him. I have kept it reverently, this picture of him, although it means nothing to me. It has grown old too, yes, receding, as you say, into the past. But time, in ageing the picture, has not aged my father; my father has not lived through this period of time. And he presents himself before me empty, devoid of all the life that for him has not existed; he presents himself before me with his old picture of himself as a young man, which says nothing to me, which cannot say anything to me, because he does not even know that I exist. It is, in fact, a portrait he had made of himself before he married; a portrait, therefore, of a time when he was not my father. I do not exist in him, there, just as all my life has been lived without him.”

“It is sad...”

“Sad, yes. But in every family, in the old photograph albums, on the little table by the sofa in every provincial drawing-room, think of all the faded portraits of people who no longer

mean anything to us, of whom we no longer know who they were, what they did, how they died...”

All of a sudden he changed the subject to ask me, with a frown:

“How long can a film be made to last?”

He no longer turned to me as to a person with whom he took pleasure in conversing; but in my capacity as an operator. And the tone of his voice was so different, the expression of his face had so changed that I suddenly felt rise up in me once again that contempt which for some time past I have been cherishing for everything and everybody. Why did he wish to know how long a film could last? Had he attached himself to me to find out this? Or from a desire to make my flesh creep, leaving me to guess that he intended to do something rash that very day, so that our walk together should leave me with a tragic memory or a sense of remorse?

I felt tempted to stop short in front of him and to shout in his face:

“I say, my dear fellow, you can drop all that with me, because I don't take the slightest interest in you! You can do all the mad things you please, this evening, to-morrow: I shan't stir! You may perhaps have asked me how long a film can last to make me think that you are leaving behind you that picture of yourself with your finger on your lips? And you think perhaps that you are going to fill the whole world with pity and terror with that enlarged picture, in which they can count your eyelashes? How long do you expect a film to last?”

I shrugged my shoulders and answered:

“It all depends upon how often it is used.”

He too from the change in my tone must have realised that my attitude towards him had changed also, and he began to look at me in a way that troubled me.

The position was this: he was still here on earth a petty creature. Useless, almost a nonentity; but he existed, and was walking beside me, and was suffering. It was true that he was

suffering, like all the rest of us, from life which is the true malady of us all. He was suffering for no worthy reason; but whose fault was it if he had been born so petty? Petty as he was, he was suffering, and his suffering was great for him, however unworthy... It was from life that he suffered, from one of the innumerable accidents of life, which had fallen upon him to take from him the little that he had in him and rend and destroy him! At the moment he was here, Etili walking by my side, on a June evening, the sweetness of which he could not taste; to-morrow perhaps, since life had so turned against him, he would no longer exist: those legs of his would never be set in motion again to walk; he would never see again this avenue along which we were going; and he would never again clothe his feet in those fine patent leather shoes and those silk socks, would never again take pleasure, even in the height of his desperation, as he stood before the glass of his wardrobe every morning, in the elegance of the faultless coat upon his handsome slim body which I could put out my hand now and touch, still living, conscious, by my side.

"Brother..."

No, I did not utter that word. There are certain words that we hear, in a fleeting moment; we do not say them. Christ could say them, who was not dressed like me and was not, like me, an operator. Amid a human society which delights in a cinematographic show and tolerates a profession like mine, certain words, certain emotions become ridiculous.

"If I were to call this Signor Nuti _brother_," I thought, "he would take offence; because... I may have taught him a little philosophy as to pictures that grow old, but what am I to him? An operator: a hand that turns a handle."

He is a "gentleman," with madness already latent perhaps in the ivory box of his skull, with despair in his heart, but a rich "titled

gentleman" who can well remember having known me as a poor student, a humble tutor to Giorgio Mirelli in the villa by Sorrento. He intends to keep the distance between me and

himself, and obliges me to keep it too, now, between him and myself: the distance that time and my profession have created. Between him and me, the machine.

"Excuse me," he asked, just as we were reaching the house, "how will you manage to-morrow about taking the scene of the shooting of the tiger?"

"It is quite easy," I answered. "I shall be standing behind you."

"But won't there be the bars of the cage, all the plants in between?"

"They won't be in my way. I shall be inside the cage with you."

He stood and stared at me in surprise:

"You will be inside the cage too?"

"Certainly," I answered calmly.

"And if... if I were to miss?"

"I know that you are a crack shot. Not that it will make any difference. To-morrow all the actors will be standing round the cage, looking on. Several of them will be armed and ready to fire if you miss."

He stood for a while lost in thought, as though this information had annoyed him.

Then: "They won't fire before I do?" he said.

"No, of course not. They will fire if it is necessary."

"But in that case," he asked, "why did that fellow... that Signor Ferro insist upon all those conditions, if there is really no danger?"

"Because in Ferro's case there might perhaps not have been all those others, outside the cage, armed."

"Ah! Then they are for me? They have taken these precautions for me? How ridiculous! Whose doing is it? Yours, perhaps?"

"Mine, no. What have I got to do with it?"

"How do you know about it, then?"

"Polacco said so."

"Said so to you? Then it was Polacco? Ah, I shall have something to say to him to-morrow morning! I won't have it, do

you understand? I won't have it!"

"Are you addressing me?"

"You too!"

"Dear Sir, let me assure you that what you say leaves me perfectly indifferent: hit or miss your tiger; do all the mad things you like inside the cage: I shall not stir a finger, you may be sure of that.

Whatever happens, I shall remain quite impassive and go on turning my handle. Bear that in mind, if you please!"

4.

Turn the handle; I have turned it. I have kept my word: to the end.

But the vengeance that I sought to accomplish upon the obligation imposed on me, as the slave of a machine, to serve up life to my machine as food, life has chosen to turn back upon me. Very good. No one henceforward can deny that I have now arrived at perfection.

As an operator I am now, truly, perfect.

About a month after the appalling disaster which is still being discussed everywhere, I bring these notes to an end.

A pen and a sheet of paper: there is no other way left to me now in which I can communicate with my fellow-men. I have lost my voice; I am dumb now for ever. Elsewhere in these notes I have written: "I suffer from this silence of mine, into which everyone comes, as into a place of certain hospitality. _I should like now my silence to close round me altogether_." Well, it has closed round me. I could not be better qualified to act as the servant of a machine.

But I must tell you the whole story, as it happened.

The wretched fellow went, next morning, to Borgalli to complain forcibly of the ridiculous figure which, as he was informed, Polacco intended to make him cut with these precautions.

He insisted at all costs that the orders should be cancelled,

offering to give them all a specimen, if they needed it, of his well-known skill as a marksman. Polacco excused himself to Borgalli, saying that he had taken these measures not from any want of confidence in Nuti's courage or sureness of eye, but from prudence, knowing Nuti to be extremely nervous, as for that matter he was shewing himself to be at that moment by uttering this excited protest, instead of the grateful, friendly thanks which Polacco had a right to expect from him. "Besides," he unfortunately added, pointing to me, "you see, Commendatore, there's Gubbio here too, who has to go into the cage..."

The poor wretch looked at me with such contempt that I immediately turned upon Polacco, exclaiming:

"No, no, my dear fellow! Don't bother about me, please! You know very well that I shall go on quietly turning my handle, even if I see this gentleman in the jaws and claws of the beast!"

There was a laugh from the actors who had gathered round to listen; whereupon Polacco shrugged his shoulders and gave way, or pretended to give way. Fortunately for me, as I learned afterwards, he gave secret instructions to Fantappiè and one of the others to conceal their weapons and to stand ready for any emergency. Nuti went off to his dressing-room to put on his sporting clothes; I went to the Negative Department to prepare my machine for its meal. Fortunately for the company, I drew a much larger supply of film than would be required, to judge approximately by the length of the scene. When I returned to the crowded lawn, by the side of the enormous cage, set with a forest scene, the other cage, with the tiger inside it, had already been carried out and placed so that the two cages opened into one another. It only remained to pull up the door of the smaller cage.

Any number of actors from the four companies had assembled on either side, close to the cage, so that they could see between the tree trunks and branches that concealed its bars. I hoped for a moment that the Nestoroff, having secured her object,

would at least have had the prudence not to come. But there she was, alas!

She stood apart from the crowd, a little way off, with Carlo Ferro, dressed in bright green, and was smiling as she repeatedly nodded her head in agreement with what Ferro was saying to her, albeit from the grim attitude in which he stood by her side it seemed evident that such a smile was not the appropriate answer to his words. But it was meant for the others, that smile, for all of us who stood watching her, and was also for me, a brighter smile, when I fixed my gaze on her; and it said to me once again that she was not afraid of anything, because the greatest possible evil for her I already knew: she had it by her side—there it was—Ferro; he was her punishment, and to the very end she I was determined, with that smile, to taste its, full flavour in the coarse words which he was probably addressing to her at that moment.

Taking my eyes from her, I sought those of Nuti. They were clouded. Evidently he too had caught sight of the Nestoroff there in the

distance; but he chose to pretend that he had not. His face had grown stiff. He made an effort to smile, but smiled with his lips alone, a faint, nervous smile, at what some one was saying to him. With his black velvet cap on his head, with its long peak, his red coat, a huntsman's brass horn slung over his shoulder, his white buckskin breeches fitting close to his thighs; booted and spurred, rifle in hand: he was ready.

The door of the big cage, through which ha and I were to enter, was opened from outside; to help us to climb in, two stage hands placed a pair of steps beneath it. He entered the cage first, then I. While I was setting up my machine on its tripod, which had been handed to me through the door of the cage, I noticed that Nuti first of all knelt down on the spot marked out for him, then rose and went across to thrust apart the boughs at one side of the cage, as though he were making a loophole there. I alone was in a position to ask him:

“Why?”

But the state of feeling that had grown up between us did not allow of our exchanging a single word at this stage. His action might therefore have been interpreted by me in several ways, which would have left me uncertain at a moment when the most absolute and precise certainty was essential. And then it was just as though Nuti had not moved at all; not only did I not think any more about his action, it was exactly as though I had not even noticed it.

He took his stand on the spot marked out for him, raising his rifle; I gave the signal:

“Ready.”

We heard from the other cage the sound of the door being pulled up. Polacco, perhaps seeing the animal begin to move towards the open door, shouted amid the silence:

“Are you ready? Shoot!”

And I began to turn the handle, with my eyes on the tree trunks in the background, through which the animal's head was now protruding, lowered, as though peering out to explore the country; I saw that head slowly drawn back, the two forepaws remain firm, close together, and the hindlegs gradually, silently gather strength and the back rise in an arch in readiness for the spring. My hand was impassively keeping the time that I had set for its movement, faster, slower, dead slow, as though my will had flowed down—firm, lucid, inflexible—into my wrist, and from there had assumed entire control, leaving my brain free to think, my heart to feel; so that my hand continued to obey even when with a pang of terror I saw Nuti take his aim from the beast and slowly turn the muzzle of his rifle towards the spot where a moment earlier he had opened a loophole among the boughs, and fire, and the tiger immediately spring upon him and become merged with him, before my eyes, in a horrible writhing mass. Drowning the most deafening shouts that came from all the actors outside the cage as they ran instinctively towards the Nestoroff who had fallen at the shot, drowning the cries of Carlo Ferro, I heard

there in the cage the deep growl of the beast and the horrible gasp of the man as he lay helpless in its fangs, in its claws, which were tearing his throat and chest; I heard, I heard, I kept on hearing above that growl, above that gasp, the continuous ticking of the machine, the handle of which my hand, alone, of its own accord, still kept on turning; and I waited for the beast to spring next upon me, having brought him down; and the moments of waiting seemed to me an eternity, and it seemed to me that throughout eternity I had been counting them, as I turned, still turned the handle, powerless to stop, when finally an arm was thrust in between the bars, carrying a revolver, and fired a shot point blank into the tiger's ear over the mangled corpse of Nuti; and I was pulled back and dragged from the cage with the handle of the machine so tightly clasped in my fist that it was impossible at first to wrest it from me. I uttered no groan, no cry: my voice, from terror, had perished in my throat for ever.

Well, I have rendered the firm a service from which they will reap a fortune. As soon as I was able, I explained to the people who gathered round me terror-struck, first of all by signs, then in writing, that they were to take good care of the machine, which had been wrenched from my hand: that machine had in its maw the life of a man; I had given it that life to eat to the very last, until the moment when that arm had been thrust in to kill the tiger. There was a fortune to be extracted from this film, what with the enormous publicity and the morbid curiosity which the sordid atrocity of the drama of that slaughtered couple would everywhere arouse.

Ah, that it would fall to my lot to feed literally on the life of a man one of the many machines invented by man for his pastime, I could never have guessed. The life which this machine has devoured was naturally no more than it could be in a time like the present, in an age of machines; a production stupid in one aspect, mad in another, inevitably, and in the former more, in the latter rather less stamped with a brand of

vulgarity.

I have found salvation, I alone, in my silence, with my silence, which has made me thus—according to the standard of the times—perfect. My friend Simone Pau will not understand this, more and more determined to drown himself in _superfluity_, the perpetual inmate of a Casual Shelter. I have already secured a life of ease with the compensation which the firm has given me for the service I have rendered it, and I shall soon be rich with the royalties which have been assigned to me from the hire of the monstrous film. It is true that I shall not know what to do with these riches; but I shall not reveal my embarrassment to anyone; least of all to Simone Pau, who comes every day to shake me, to abuse me, in the hope of forcing me out of this inanimate silence, which makes him furious. He would like to see me weep, would like me at least with my eyes to shew distress or anger; to make him understand by signs that I agree with him, that I too believe that life is there, in that _superfluity_ of his. I do not move an eyelid; I sit gazing at him, rigid, motionless, until he flies from the house in a rage. Poor Cavalena, from another angle, is studying on my behalf textbooks of nervous pathology, suggests injections and electric batteries, hovers round me to persuade me to agree to a surgical operation on my vocal chords; and Signorina Luisetta, penitent, heartbroken at my calamity, in which she chooses to detect an element of heroism, timidly lets me see now that she would like to hear issue, if not from my lips, at any rate from my heart a “yes” for herself.

No, thank you. Thanks to everybody. I have had enough. I prefer to remain like this. The times are what they are; life is what it is; and in the sense that I give to my profession, I intend to go on as I am—alone, mute and impassive—being the operator.

Is the stage set?

“Are you ready? Shoot...”

THE END

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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