The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 10 – A font and an ash-tray

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In Italiano – Il fu Mattia Pascal
En Español – El difunto Matias Pascal

The Late Mattia Pascal
Chapter 10
A font and an ash-tray

A few days later I was in Rome, to find a permanent abode there.

Why Rome and not some other city? There was a reason, as I see now; but I must not go into it. The discussion would break up my story with reflections which, I believe, would be quite irrelevant just here. At the moment I selected Rome, because I liked it better than any other place of my acquaintance; and because, with all the visitors who are constantly coming and going there, it seemed the environment most likely to harbor a stranger like me without asking too many questions.

To find a suitable room on a quiet street with a reliable family was not so simple a matter. I finally chose one on the _Via Ripetta_, with a view over the river. The first impression I had of the people who were to house me was not, I must confess, at all favorable; so little so, in fact, that on returning to my hotel, I debated for some time as to whether it would not be advisable to hunt farther still.

Over the door, on the fifth floor, were two name-plates: _Paleari_, to the left, _Papiano_, to the right. Under the latter was a visiting card fastened to the wall with two thumb-tacks: _Silvia Caporale_.

“When I knocked, an old man of at least sixty (Paleari? Papiano?) came to the door. He had, literally, nothing on but his underdrawers and a pair of worn-out slippers; so that I could not fail to observe the ruddy smoothness of the skin on his naked torso. His hands were covered with soap suds, of which also there was a veritable turban on his head.

“Oh, excuse me,” he apologized; “I thought it was the servant…. Beg your pardon… hardly presentable, as you see…. Adriana! Terenzio! Well, hurry, won’t you? A gentleman here! Just a moment, if you don’t mind, sir. Won’t you come in?… What can we do for you?”

“You were advertising a furnished room, if I am not mistaken…”

“Why yes, my daughter will be here in just a moment…. Adriana, Adriana! The room!”

A young lady, blushing, confused, embarrassed, came hurrying in, a short frail little thing, with light hair, pale cheeks and two soft blue eyes, filled with the same sadness which her whole face suggested. “Adriana!” I commented mentally. “My name! What a coincidence!”

“And where is Terenzio?” asked the old man of the shampoo.

“Why, you know very well, papa! He went to Naples yesterday! But, papa, go into the other room, please!If you could see yourself!… The idea!”

There was a note of tenderness in the girl’s scolding that showed the gentleness of her disposition despite her mortification at the moment.

“Oh yes, I remember, I remember,” said the old man; and he started away, dragging his mules along after him noisily, and resuming the massage of his bald head and now his gray beard also before he reached the door.

I could not repress a smile, but I softened it in order not to increase the confusion of the little young lady, who, for her part, looked the other way, to conceal her chagrin. I had taken her for a mere girl at first-but now on closer inspection I observed that she was a grown woman—why else, in fact, would she be wearing that absurd wrapper far too large for her tiny form? She was in half mourning, also, as I noticed.

Speaking in a very low voice and continuing to withhold her eyes from me (who knows the impression I must have given her?), she led me along a dark hallway to the room that was for rent. As the door swung open, my lungs expanded to the flood of light and air that came streaming in through two large windows. We were on the river side of the building. In the distance, lay Monte Mario, Ponte Margherita, all the modern Prati quarter as far as the Castel Sant’ Angelo. Directly below us, the old Ripetta bridge and the new one in process of construction alongside it. Over here to the left, the Ponte Umberto and the old houses of Tordinona following the broad bend of the Tiber; and beyond, the green summit of the Janiculum, with the great fountain of San Pietro in Montorio and the equestrian statue of Garibaldi.

I could not resist these exterior attractions, and engaged the

room at once. For that matter it was pleasingly furnished too, with neat hangings in blue and white.

“This little balcony next door belongs to us too,” the girl in the big wrapper obligingly added; “at least for the time being. They are going to tear it down some day, they say, because it infringes.”

“It does what?”

“It infringes! I mean it overhangs the city’s right of way. But it will be a long time before they get the River Drive along this far!”

I smiled at this very serious talk from such a tiny girl in such a big dress, and said:

“Will it?”

She was embarrassed at my mirth and at my inane remark, lowered her eyes and pressed her teeth to her lower lip. To relieve her, I said in a very businesslike way:

“No children in the house, I suppose?”

She shook her head without speaking, perhaps detecting in my question an ironical note I had not intended. Again I hastened to make amends:

“You let no other rooms than this?”

“This is our best one,” she answered still looking at the floor; “I am sure that if you don’t like this…”

“No, no, I wanted to know whether…”

“Yes, we do rent another,” she interrupted, raising her eyes with a forced indifference, “on the other side of the house, facing the street. A young lady has been taking it for two years past…. She gives piano lessons … but not at home.”

And her features hinted at a smile but a very faint and sad one.

“There are three of us: father, myself and my brother-in-law…”

“Paleari?”

“No, Paleari is my father’s name. My brother-in-law is Terenzio Papiano; but he is soon going away with his brother, who, for the moment, is staying with us too. My sister died… six months ago.”

To change the subject I asked her what rent I should have to pay. There was no difficulty on that point.

“The first week in advance?” I asked.

“You decide that; or rather, if you would leare your name…”

With a nervous smile, I began rummaging through my coat pockets:

“I’m sorry… I don’t seem to have a single card with me… but-I heard your father call you Adri-ana. … My name is Adriano, like yours. Perhaps you don’t feel nattered…?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” she asked, noticing my strange confusion and laughing this time like a real child.

I laughed too and added:

“Well then, if you don’t object, you may call me Adriano Meis… that’s my name. May I move in this afternoon, or would you like
tomorrow better…”

“Just as you wish,” said she; but I went away with the feeling that she would have been better satisfied if I never came back at all. I had committed the unpardonable breach of not holding her big grown-up wrapper in sufficient awe.

Before many days, however, it was perfectly apparent to me that the ugly costume was a matter of necessity with her, though she probably would have liked to dress somewhat better. The whole weight of the household rested on her shoulders, and things would have gone badly had it not been for her.

The old man, Anselmo Paleari, who had come to the door with a turban of soap-suds on the outside of his head, had brains of about the same consistency on the inside. The day I entered the house to live, he came to my room, not so much, as he said, to apologize for his unconventional attire at the time of my first call, as for the pleasure of making the acquaintance of a man who must certainly be either a scholar or an artist.

“Am I wrong!”

“You are! Nothing of the artist about me; and very little of the scholar…. I do read a book once in a while…”

“And I see you have good ones,” said he, examining the backs of the volumes which I had set in line on my writing table. “Well, some day I’ll show you mine, eh? For I have some good books too. However…”

He shrugged his shoulders and stood there in a sort of abstraction, a blank expression on his face, evidently quite oblivious to everything, forgetting where he was and with whom he was talking. He muttered “however” a couple more times, drawing the corners of his mouth down after each; then he turned on his heel and went away without another word.

At the moment I was moderately surprised, to say the least, at hisbehaviour; but later on, when he invited me into his room and showed me his books, as he had promised, I came to understand not only the man’s distraction but many other things about him. I noticed titles like this: “Death and the Hereafter”; “Man and His Bodies”; “The Seven Principles of Life”; “Karma”; “The Astral Plane”; “A Key to Theosophy.”

For Mr. Anselmo Paleari was a convert to the theosophical school.

Office manager, formerly, in some department or other of the government, he had been put on the retired list before his time; and this had been his ruin, not only from the financial point of view but because, now, with his whole day free, there was nothing to restrain his weakness for research in various branches of the occult. Half his pension, at least, must have gone into those books, of which he owned a small-sized library. Nor could theosophy have satisfied him entirely: traces of the blight of scepticism were also much in evidence on his book-shelves: publications and reviews on philosophy, ancient and modern; treatises on science; and a whole collection on psychic research, in which he was now making experiments.

In Signorina Silvia Caporale, the piano teacher, old Mr. Paleari had discovered unusual psychic aptitudes—not very well developed, to be sure, but promising much with time and proper exercise. In fact, he saw in this lady a future rival of the most celebrated mediums.

For my part, I must testify that never in all my life have I seen (in a coarse, ugly face, more like a mask of Mardi Gras than a human countenance) a pair of such sorrowful eyes as those of Miss Silvia Caporale. Staring, bulging, intensely black, they gave the impression of being fixed in her head with lead weights to open and close them, like a doll's. The lady was well over forty; and in addition to the attractions of maturity, she had a rather handsome mustache under a nose that was a small bright red ball.

I learned eventually that the poor woman drank, drank heavily, to forget her age, her repulsiveness, and a hopeless love. More than one evening she would come home, her hat on askew, her nose red as a carrot, her eyes half-closed and more sorrowful than ever—in a deplorable state, in short. She would

throw herself on her bed and then gradually discharge all the wine she had absorbed in the form of torrential tears. Whereupon the little lady of the wrapper would get up out of bed, go into the other room, and take care of the woman for a good part of the night. Sorry for the poor thing, you see, all alone like that in the world, with the bitterness and jealousy of unrequited love, likely to commit suicide at any time—as she had tried to do twice already. Diplomatically the little lady would extract from her invalid a promise to be good—never, never to do such a thing again; and, sure enough, you would see the piano-teacher appear next day in her best finery, tripping gaily, playfully about, with the winsome ways of a capricious debutante. Once in a while she would earn a day's pay by accompanying some nascent cafe star at a rehearsal—and the result would be a new debauch that evening, and some new article of finery the following morning. Never a penny for her rent, of course, nor for the very modest board served her in the family.

However, she could not be sent away. For one thing, how could Mr. Anselmo Paleari go on with his psychic researches without her? But there was still another reason. Two years before, Miss Caporale's mother had died, leaving furniture which, on being sold, netted some six thousand lire. Coming to live at the Paleari's, the piano teacher had entrusted this money to Terenzio Papiano for an investment which he had represented to her as a sure thing. The six thousand lire had not been heard from again.

When I got this story from Miss Caporale herself—she wept copiously as she told it—I was able to find some excuse for Signor Anselmo, whom I had secretly been accusing of improper guardianship in bringing
his daughter into contact with such a woman in selfish pursuit of his own folly in occultism.

It is true that little Adrians was such an instinctively sound and virtuous little miss that she was really in no danger. In

fact she was on her own guard, resenting her father's mysterious practices, and all his talk about the evocation of spirits, with the Caporale woman.

For Adriana was a devout little person, as I had reason to perceive during my very first days in the house. Fastened to the wall over the stand at the head of my bed was a small holy-water font of blue glass. One night I lay smoking in bed trying to read myself to sleep with one of old Paleari's crazy volumes. Distractedly I knocked my ashes, and finally put the stub of my cigarette, into the blue glass receptacle.

The next day the font had disappeared; and on my stand I found an ash-tray. I thought I would ask Adriana if she was the one who had made the change. Flushing slightly she replied:

"Yes; I'm sorry, but I thought you needed the ashtray rather!"

"Was there any holy water in the font?"

"There was. The church of San Rocco is just across the street!"

And she went away.

That diminutive mamma must have taken me for a holy man if she brought extra water for me when she went to get her own at the Church of San Rocco. I imagine she did not take that trouble for her father. And as for Miss Silvia Caporale, if she had a font at all, it would have been for "holy wine,"—_vin santo_ rather!

Suspended in a strange void, as I felt myself to be, I would fall into long meditations on the slightest provocation. And this matter of the holy water font reminded me that since my early boyhood, I had been quite neglecting religious practices. Yes, I had not been to Church since the last time Pinzone had taken me there with Berto under orders from mamma. I never thought of asking myself what my beliefs really were;

and the late Mattia Pascal had come to a violent death without holy ministrations.

Suddenly now I found myself in a very surprising situation. As far as all my former acquaintances could know, I had rid myself—for good or for evil, as the case might be—of the most troublesome and disturbing worry that a living man can have: the fear of death. Who knows how many people back in Miragno might be saying:

“Lucky fellow, after all…. He has solved the one great problem!”

Whereas I had not solved anything at all! Here were these books of Anselmo Paleari, and what did they have to say? They said that the dead, the really dead that is, found themselves in much the same fix that I was in—in the “shells,” namely, of the _Kamaloka_, in which a certain Dr. Leadbeater, author of the “Astral Plane” (the astral plane is the first sphere of the invisible world) places suicides especially, representing them as moved by all the desires and impulses that living people have, without being ever able to satisfy them (stripped as they are of their carnal bodies, which, meantime, they do not know they have lost).

“If that’s so,” I thought, “I may very well have been drowned in the Flume at ‘The Coops.’ This notion I have of being alive may be just an illusion.” Certain kinds of insanity are, as is well known, contagious. Paleari’s brand, though I rebelled against it for some time, at last attacked me. Not that I believed I was really dead—that would not have been so bad; for the worst thing about death is dying; after that, I doubt whether people are so anxious to come back to life. But the point is that all at once I realized that I should have to die again. And that was a very painful discovery. After my suicide back there in the mill-flume, I had naturally taken it for granted that I had only life in front of me. And here was this Paleari fellow reminding me of death every other minute!

He could talk of nothing else, curses on him! But he talked of it with so much enthusiasm, and every now and then he dropped such curious remarks, with such unusual figures of speech, that I was always changing my mind about going somewhere else to live in order to be free of him. Though Paleari's beliefs seemed to me a bit childish, they were optimistic, on the whole; and, once I had awakened to the fact that I should have to die in earnest some day, it was not unpleasant to hear the thing spoken of in just his way.

"Is it reasonable?" he asked me one afternoon after reading me a passage from a book by Finot—it was a sentimental and very gruesome treatise on death with speculations such as a gravedigger addicted to morphine might make, picturing how the worms grow from thedecomposition of human bodies. "Is it reasonable? Matter, I grant you, matter! Let us admit that it's all matter! But there are forms and forms of matter, kinds and kinds of matter, ways and ways of its manifesting itself. Here it is a stone; but there it is imponderable, impalpable ether, if you please. Take this body of mine: finger-nails, teeth, hair—and notice—this delicate, delicate tissue of my eye. All matter! Well—who can deny it?—the substance which we call soul may very well be matter—but not, for heaven's sake, matter like my fingernails, or my teeth, or my hair; but matter, rather, like ether—understand! And you people, you admit that there is ether, but not that there is soul! I ask you: is it reasonable? Matter—all well and good! Follow my argument now and see where I come out—granting everything to the other side. Here is Nature! Now we think of man as the heir of a limitless series of generations—do we not?—as the product of a slow natural creation. Oh, I know: you, my dear Mr. Meis you think man's a brute beast anyhow, and a cruel, stupid beast, one of the least respectable of all the animals. Well—I grant you even that, if you wish. Let us say that man represents a very low grade indeed in the scale of living beings. Here you have a worm; and here a man. How many grades shall we put between them? Eight? Seven? Make it

as few as five! But, bless my soul, it took Nature thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands of centuries to make a man five times better than a worm. It required some evolution, eh? for matter to change from this beast that crawls on its belly to this beast that steals and kills and lies, and cheats, but that also writes a _Divine Comedy ,Signer Meis, a _Divine Comedy_, and is capable of the sacrifices your mother made for you and my mother made for me! And then—zip, it's all over, eh? Nothing again, eh? Zero, eh? Is it reasonable? Oh, yes, my nose, my foot, my leg—they become worm again. But not my soul, my dear sir! Not my soul! Matter, I grant you, but not matter like my nose, or my feet, or my leg, Mr. Meis. Is it reasonable?"

"Excuse me, Mr. Paleari," I interrupted. "Here you have a great man—a genius—walking along the street. He slips on a banana peel, bumps the back of his head—and suddenly he loses his mind! Now, where's his soul?"

Signer Anselmo stopped and looked at me, as though someone had just thrown a mill-stone down in front of him on the floor.

"Where's his soul?"

"Yes. Take you or me…. Well, take me, though I'm not a great man. I've got—oh, let's be modest—. some intelligence. However, I go walking along the street, I fall, I fracture my skull, I become a half-wit. Where's my soul?"

Paleari joined his two hands, with a smile of benign compassion. Then he answered:

"But why on earth should you fall and break your head, my dear Mr. Meis?"

"Just for an hypothesis."

"Not at all! Not at all! You go walking right along about your business! Why bother to fall I There are plenty of old people

who lose their minds in course of nature without needing to fall and break their heads. You are trying to prove by that argument, that since the soul seems to weaken with the infirmity of the body, it must die when the body dies? But excuse me, just think of the matter the other way round. Take cases of very bad bodies that have nevertheless held brilliant souls: Giacomo Leopardi, for instance; or old men, like His Holiness, Pope Leo XIII. What do you say to that? Now, imagine a piano and a person playing on it. At a certain point, the instrument gets out of tune, then one wire breaks; then two; then three jnore. With his piano in that condition the man is going to play badly, isn't he, great artist though he be? Now finally the piano stops working altogether. Do you mean that the player has ceased to exist?"

"I see: our brain is the piano; and the pianist our soul?"

"Exactly, Mr. Meis, though the illustration is old and trite. If the brain goes wrong, the soul expresses itself badly: imbecility, madness, what not. Just as when the pianist, perhaps accidentally, perhaps carelessly, perhaps deliberately, spoils the piano, he has to pay. And down to the last cent, too, he has to pay! There is exact compensation for everything. But that's another question. Excuse me, does it mean nothing to you that all humanity, as far back as history goes, has always had faith in another life? It's a fact, Mr. Meis, a fact—real proof!"

"May be the instinct for self-preservation…"

"No sir, no sir! What do I care about this bag of skin and bones I have to carry around with me? It's a jolly nuisance. I put up with it, because I know I have to. But now if you come and demonstrate to me, that after I've lugged it around for five, six, ten years more, there's nothing to it anyhow, that it's all over then and there, why—I just get rid of it right now, this very minute. So where is your instinct for self-preservation? I keep going because I feel that it can't all

end that way. But, you may say, the individual man is one thing, and the race another; that the individual perishes while the race continues its evolution. Pine reasoning that, I must say. Just consider: as though humanity were not I, and I humanity; as though we were not, all of us together, one whole! And doesn't every one of us feel the same way—that it would be the most absurd, the most atrocious thing conceivable if there were nothing to us but this miserable breath of air which we call earthly life? Fifty, sixty years of hardship, of toil, of suffering—all for what? For nothing? For
humanity! But supposing humanity itself comes to an end some day! Just think of it! In that case all this life of ours, all this progress, all this evolution—for nothing? And they say, meantime, that there can be no such thing as "nothing," non-being pure and simple! Life is merely the convalescence of a sick planet—eh?—as you said the other day. Very well, call it that; but we must see what we mean by it. The trouble with science, Mr. Meis, is that it bothers too much about life, to the exclusion of other things…"

"Naturally," I sighed, with a smile, "because we've got to live…"

"But we've also got to die," Paleari rejoined.

"I understand; but why worry so much about it all the time?"

"Why? Why, because we can't understand life, unless we know something about death. The governing criteria for all our actions, the guiding line that will lead us from the labyrinth, the light of our eyes in short, Mr. Meis, must come to us from over there, from beyond the tomb, from beyond death!"

"Light from so much darkness?"

"Darkness? It may be dark to you; but light a little lamp there, the
lamp of faith, burning with the pure oil of the soul! Without

such a lamp we grope about like so many blind men on this earth—for all of the electric lights we may have invented. Incandescent bulbs work all right for this life, Mr. Meis, but we need something that will give us a glimmer, at least, for death. By the way, Mr. Meis, I'm doing my bit with a little red lantern which I light on certain evenings—we all ought to contribute what we can to the common effort for knowledge. Just now, my son-in-law, Mr. Terenzio Papiano, is away at Naples. But he'll be back in a few weeks; and I will invite you to one of our seances. And who knows—perhaps that poor insignificant red lantern of mine—well, anyhow—you wait and see…"

I need hardly say that Mr. Anselmo Paleari did not make very agreeable company; but, as I thought the matter over, could I, without risk, that is to say without feeling the constant obligation to deceive, hope for some society more in touch with the world? And my mind went back to Cavaliere Tito Lenzi. Now this old man, Anselmo Paleari, took no interest in me whatever. He was satisfied so long as I would listen while he talked. Almost every morning, after he had taken a long and careful bath, he would go with me for a stroll, now up the Janiculum, now to the Aventine, now to Monte Mario and sometimes as far as the Ponte Nomentano. And all the while we would be talking about death.

"And this," I would mutter, "is what I have gained by not really dying in the first place!"

Occasionally I would try to start a conversation on some other subject, but Paleari seemed blind to all the life about him. He would walk along with his hat in his hand, every now and then raising it as though in greeting to some passing ghost. If I called his attention to anything he would comment:

"Nonsense!"

Once he turned on me suddenly with a personal question:

"Why are you living here in Rome?"

I shrugged my shoulders and answered:

"I rather like the place."

"And yet it is a gloomy city," he commented, shaking his head. "Many people express surprise that nothing ever seems to succeed here, that no modern idea ever seems able to take root in the soil. That's because they don't understand that Rome is a dead city."

"Even Rome is dead?" I exclaimed in mock consternation.

"She has been for a long time, Mr. Meis. And, believe me, it's no use trying to bring her back to life. Sleeping in the dream of her glorious past, she will have nothing to do with this miserable petty life that is swarming around her. When a city has had a life such as Rome has had, a life with so many definitely individual features, itcannot become a modern city, a city, that is, like any other city. Rome lies over there, with her great heart broken to fragments on the spurs of the Capitol. New buildings go up—but do they belong to Rome? Look, Mr. Meis. My daughter, Adriana, told me about the holy water font that was in your room; and she took it out, remember? Well, the other day she dropped it and it broke on the floor. Only the basin itself was left. That is now on the writing desk in my room; I am using it deliberately, as you did, the first time I believe, by inadvertence. Well, that's the way it is with Rome, Mr. Meis. The Popes, in their fashion, made of her a vessel for holy water. WeItalians have turned her into an ash tray. We have flocked here from all over Italy to knock the ash off the ends of our cigars. What but cigar ash is the frivolity of this cheap, this worthless life we are leading and the bitter poisonous pleasure it affords us?"

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Shakespeare Italia