The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 11 – Night… and the river

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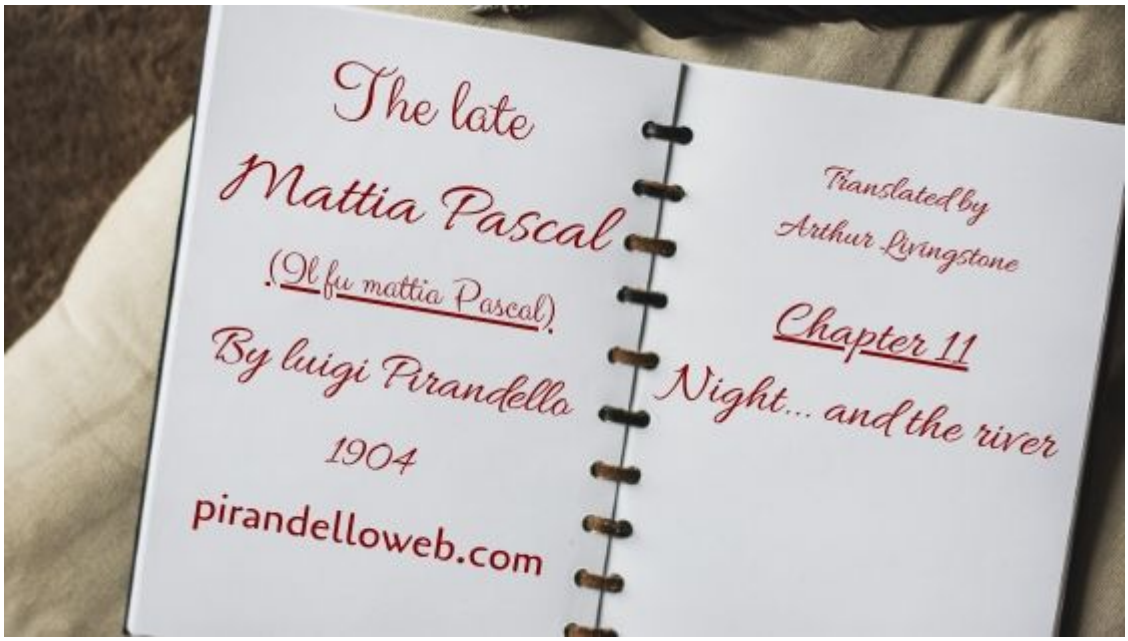
In Italiano – Il fu Mattia Pascal

En Español – El difunto Matias Pascal



The Late Mattia Pascal
Chapter 11
Night… and the river

The more intimate my relations with the family became through therespect Paleari had for my judgment and the personal good will he was always evincing toward me, the more uneasy I felt in my own mind, mysecret misgivings often amounting to acute remorse that I should bemaking my way into that home under an assumed name, under an actualdisguise, with a wholly fictitious personality (if indeed I were aperson at all). I was ever resolving to hold myself as much aloof aspossible, trying continually to remember that I could have no share in other people's lives, that I must shun intimate contacts and

do the best I could with my own solitary existence apart.

“I am free,” I would keep repeating to myself. “I am free!” But I was already beginning to understand the meaning and the limits of such freedom.

At present, for instance, it meant my unquestioned right to sit of anevening at the window of my room, looking out upon the river, as it flowed black and silent between its new walls of granite, down under the bridges which spangled the water with wriggling serpents of flame from their many lights. And my fancy would run back along the stream to its distant sources in the hills, whence it came down across field sand meadows, fields and meadows, to reach the city in front of me, passing on into fields and meadows again till at last it reached the dark palpitating sea. What did it do when it got there? Pua-a-h! A yawn! This freedom! This freedom!

But yet, would I be better off anywhere else?

On the balcony near by I would see, some evenings, the littlehouse-mother in her big dress, busily watering her potted plants. “There is living for you,” I would say to myself, watching the child in her affectionate attentions to the flowers she loved, and hoping that sooner, or later she would lift her eyes toward my window.

She never did. She knew that I was there, but whenever she was alone, she pretended not to notice. Why? Shyness, perhaps? Or was she nursing a secret grudge against me because I so obstinately refused to see in her anything more than the child she was?

“Ah, now she is setting the watering pot on the floor. Her work is done! She is standing there, her arms resting on the parapet of the balcony, looking out over the river as I am doing—perhaps to show me that she is quite indifferent as to whether I exist or not; because—I should say so!—because a woman with her responsibilities has very serious thoughts of

her own to ponder, yes indeed! Hence that meditative pose! Hence a need for solitude for her as well!”

And I smiled at my own idea of her! But afterwards, as I saw her vanish suddenly from the balcony, I wondered: might my guess not be wrong—the fruit of the instinctive vexation we feel at seeing ourselves taken as a matter of course?

“And yet, why not? Why should she notice me? Why should she speak to me unless she has to? What do I stand for in this house, unless it be the misfortune that has overtaken her, her father’s incompetence and folly, her humiliation, personified? When her father still had his position in the service, she did not need to let her rooms and have outsiders about the house—especially outsiders like me—an outsider with a cockeye, and blue glasses!”

The noise of a wagon pounding across the wooden bridge near by would rouse me from iny reverie. I would rise from my seat at the window, puffing an exclamation of nausea through my closed lips. Here was my bed; and here my books! Which? With a shrug of the shoulders, I would catch up my hat, jam it down on my head, and go out of the house, hoping to find in the streets some diversion from my galling tedium.

The walk I chose would depend upon the inspiration of the moment: now I would seek the most crowded thoroughfares, then again some deserted solitary quarter. One night, I remember, I went to the square of Saint Peter’s; and I remember also the weird impression of unreality I got from that aeon-old world enfolded by the two arms of the Portico—a world illumined by a strange dream light, engulfed in a majestic silence only emphasized by the crash of water in the two fountains. In one of these I dipped my hands. Yes, here was something tangible: the cold, I could feel! All the rest was spectral, insubstantial, deeply melancholy in a silent motionless solemnity!

Returning along the Borgo Nuovo I happened on a drunken man, whom my sober thoughtful mood seemed to strike as something funny. He approached me on tip-toe, squatted down so as to look up into my face, touched me cautiously on the elbow and finally shouted: “Cheer up, brother! Let’s see you crack a smile!” I looked at the man from head to foot, hardly awake as yet to what had happened. And again he said, but in a confidential whisper:

“Cheer up, brother! To hell with it all! Just forget it. Crack a smile!”

Then he moved along, supporting his tottering form against the wall.

There in that solitary place under the very shadow of the great sanctum, the fortuitous appearance of that drunken man, giving me his strangely intimate and strangely profound advice, seemed to daze me. I stood looking after him till he disappeared in the dark: then, I burst into a loud harsh bitter laugh:

“Cheer up! Yes, brother! But I can’t roll from tavern to tavern as you are doing, looking for happiness, as you are doing, at the bottom of a mug of wine! I should never find it there—nor anywhere else. I go to the cafe, my dear sir, where I find respectable people—smoking and talking politics! Cheer up, you say! But, my dear sir, people can be happy only on one condition—I am quoting you a reactionary, who frequents my respectable cafe: on the condition, namely that we be governed by a good old-fashioned absolutist! You are only a poor beggar, my dear sir, you know nothing about such things. But it’s the fact nevertheless. What’s the trouble with people like me? Why are we so glum? Democracy, my dear sir, democracy! Government by the majority! When you have one boss, he knows that it’s his job to satisfy many people; but when everybody has a say in running things, everybody thinks of satisfying himself. And what do we get? Tyranny, my dear

sir, in its most stupid form: tyranny masked as liberty! Of course you do! What do you think is the matter with me? Just what I say: tyranny disguised as liberty! Pua-a-h! Let’s go home again!”

But that was to be a night of adventures.

I was going through the dimly lighted Tordinona district, when I heard smothered cries coming from a dark alley off my street; and then there was a rush of people engaged in a rough-and-tumble, four men, as it proved, using heavy canes on a woman of the sidewalks.

Now I mention this little episode not to show what a brave man I can be on occasion, but just to tell how frightened I was at some of its consequences. “When I interfered they turned on me—four against one and two with their knives out. I had a good stocky cane myself and I swung it around, jumping about a good deal to avoid an attack from behind. At last the metal knob of my cane reached one of my antagonists full on the head. He staggered away, and finally took to his heels. Since the woman had been screaming at the top of her lungs, the other three thought it was time to be going too. I don’t remember exactly how I got a deep cut in the middle of my forehead. My first thought was to get the woman quieted down: but when she saw the blood streaming over my face, she began to shout for help louder than ever, trying also to wipe my wound with a silk handkerchief she had removed from her neck:

“No, let me alone, for heaven’s sake!” I protested in disgust. “Get away from here, at once… I’m all right! They’ll be arresting you!”

I hurried to a fountain on the bridge near by to wash the blood from my eyes. But by this time, two policemen had come running up, and they insisted on knowing what all the noise was about. The woman, who was a Neapolitan and liked to dramatize in the manner of her people, began to narrate the

guaio, the “woe,” she had been through, addressing the tenderest words of praise in my direction. The gendarmes insisted on my going to the station with them to give a full account of my rescue; and it was not an easy matter to dissuade them from this idea. A pretty scrape that would have been for me! My name and address on the police roster! And a write-up in the papers, the next day! Adriano Meis, a hero! I, whose duty it was to keep out of sight, in the dark, and not attract anyone’s attention!

Not even a hero, could I be, then—unless I wanted to pay for the pleasure with my scalp….

On the other hand, since I was dead already, when you think of it… why worry so much about that precious scalp?

* * *

“Are you a widower, Mr. Meis… if I do not seem impertinent?”

This question was leveled at me, point blank, one evening by Miss Silvia Caporale, as I was sitting with her and Adriana on the balcony where they had invited me to join them.

Caught off my guard, I was embarrassed momentarily for an answer:

“I, a widower? No! Why do you ask?”

“Why I notice that you are always rubbing the third finger of your left hand round and round, this way, as though you were playing with a wedding ring that isn’t there. He does, doesn’t he, Adriana!”

Now that will give you some idea of what women can do with their eyes, or at least some women; for Adriana confessed that she had never observed the habit in me.

“Well, it’s probably because your attention was never called to it,” the piano teacher answered.

I thought it best to explain that though I was not myself aware of such an idiosyncrasy, it might well be as Miss Caporale said:

“Years ago I did wear a ring on that finger for a long time; at last I had to have it cut by a goldsmith because it got too tight as my finger grew!”

“Poor little ring,” said the forty-year-older, who was in a mood for sentimentalizing that evening. “It didn’t want to come off? It hugged you so tight? Must have had some beautiful memory to…”

“Silvia!” little Adriana interrupted, reprovingly.

“What’s the harm?” the Caporale woman rejoined. “I was going to say that it must have been a question of a first love of yours…. Come, Mr. Meis, tell us something about yourself…. Are you never really going to open up?…”

“Well, you see,” said I, “I was thinking of the inference you just drew from my habit of rubbing my ring finger—a quite arbitrary inference, if I may say so, signorina. So far as I have observed widowers do not discontinue their rings, as a rule—on the theory, I suppose, that it was the wife rather than the ring that caused all the trouble. Veteran soldiers are proud of the medals they earned in combat, aren’t they? For the same reason widowers stick to their wedding rings.”

“Oh yes,” my inquisitor insisted, “you’re cleverly changing the subject!”

“How can you say that? My intention rather was to go into it more deeply.”

“More deeply, nonsense! I’m not interested in the deeps. I just had the impression—and stopped there, at the surface!”

“The impression that I was a widower?”

“Yes. And what would you say, Adriana? Don’t you think Mr. Meis looks like one?”

Adriana glanced at me furtively, but she at once lowered her eyes, too bashful long to sustain anybody’s gaze. With her usual faint smile—so sweet and sorrowful it always seemed to me—she answered:

“How should I know what widowers look like? You’re so funny, Silvia!”

Some unpleasant thought, some unwelcome image, must have flitted across her mind as she said that; for her face darkened and she turned away to look down into the river beneath us. And the other woman doubtless understood what it was: for she also turned and began looking at the view. I was puzzled for a moment; but at last, as my attention rested on Adriana’s black-bordered wrapper, I thought I knew. Yes, a fourth person, an invisible one, had intruded on our party. Terenzio Papiano, the man who had gone to Naples, was a widower. I guessed from the exchange which I had just heard that he probably did not suggest the mourner—an air which Miss Caporale found it easier to detect in me.

I confess that this unhappy turn to the conversation did not at first displease me. Tactlessly Miss Caporale had blundered into Adriana’s bitterness over her dead sister’s troubles, and the little girl’s suffering was the proper punishment for such an indiscretion. But then. I considered: looking at the matter from the woman’s point of view, might not this curiosity of hers, which to me seemed rank impertinence, be a very natural and justifiable thing? The mystery that hung about my person must surely impress people! And now since I could not endure keeping to myself, since I could not resist the temptation to seek the companionship of others, I must be resigned to the necessity of answering the questions which possible friends had every right to ask me as a step to finding out with whom they had to deal. There would be,

moreover, only one way to answer: by making up as I went along, by telling lies outright. There was no middle ground. So then the fault was not theirs but mine. Lying would, of course, make the fault worse; but if I could not accept the situation, I should go away, take up again my solitary and silent wanderings!

I could not fail to notice that Adriana herself, though she never pressed me with a question even remotely indiscreet, was all ears whenever the Caporale woman pushed her inquiries beyond, I must say, the reasonable limits of natural and excusable curiosity.

One evening, for example, there on the balcony where we now quite regularly met after I came home from dinner, she started to ask me something, laughing meanwhile and wrestling playfully with Adriana; for the little girl was shouting: “No, Silvia, don’t you dare! Don’t you dare! I shall be cross!”

“Listen, Mr. Meis,” said Silvia; “Adriana wants to know why you don’t wear at least a mustache…”

“Don’t you believe her, Mr. Meis, don’t you believe her! She was the one who… I didn’t…”

And the little housemother was so much in earnest that she burst suddenly into tears.

“There, there, there!” said Miss Caporale, trying to comfort her. “Oh, don’t cry! I was only fooling! Besides, what’s the harm?”

“The harm is—I didn’t say any such thing. And it isn’t fair! Look, Mr. Meis… we were talking of actors who are all… well, that way… and then she said: ‘Yes, like Mr. Meis? Who knows why he doesn’t grow at least a mustache?’ And I repeated after her: ‘Yes, who knows?'”

“Well,” answered Silvia, “when a person says ‘Who knows,’ it

means that that person wants to know…”

“But you said it first, not I,” said Adriana, boiling.

“May I interrupt?” I asked, with the idea of making peace.

“No, you may not!” snapped Adriana. “Good night, Mr. Meis!” And she was away into the house.

But Silvia Caporale brought her back by main force:

“Don’t be silly, Adriana… I was only joking. What a little spitfire you are! Now Mr. Meis is a dear nice man, and he doesn’t mind—do you, Mr. Meis I You see? He’s now going to tell us why he doesn’t grow at least a mustache!”

And Adriana laughed this time, though her eyes were still wet with tears.

“Because,” I whispered hoarsely, “because… I belong to a secret order of conspirators that prohibits hair on the face!”

“We don’t believe it,” whispered Silvia, in the same hoarse tragic manner; “but we do know that you are a man of mystery. Explain yourself, sir! What were you doing at the General Delivery window in the post-office this afternoon?”

“I, at the Post-Office?”

“Yes sir! Do you deny it? About four o’clock! I was at San Silvestro myself, and I saw you with my own eyes!”

“It must have been my double, signorina. I was not there!”
“Oh, of course, you weren’t! Of course you weren’t!” said Silvia incredulously. “Secret correspondence, eh? Because, it’s true—isn’t it, Adriana?—that this gentleman never gets a letter here! The charwoman told me so, notice!”

Adriana moved uneasily on her chair. She did not like this kind of jesting.

“Don’t you mind her,” said she, sweeping me with a rapid, apologetic and almost caressing glance. “Don’t you mind her!”

“No, I get no mail, either here, or at the Post Office!” I answered. “That, alas, is the sorry truth! No one writes to me for the simple reason that there is no ona to do so!”

“Not even a friend? Not even one friend in the whole wide world?”

“Not even one! Just I and my shadow, on the face of the earth! We are good friends, I and my shadow! I take him with me everyhere I go; but I never stopped long enough in one place to make any other lasting acquaintances!”

“Lucky man,” exclaimed Silvia with a sigh. “It must be wonderful to travel all one’s life. Well, tell us about your travels. There now!… Since you refuse to talk about everything else…!”

Once the shoals of these first embarrassing questions passed, keeping off here with the oar of the big lie, avoiding shipwreck there with another, veering warily again with still a third, I brought the bark of my fiction through the waters of danger and finally spread my sails to the full breeze on the open sea of fancy.

Strange!—But after a year or more of enforced silence, I now indulged in an orgy of talking. Every evening there on the balcony, I would talk and talk and talk—of my rambling about in the world, of the things I had seen, of the impressions I had received, of the incidents that had happened to me. I was myself astonished at the wealth of observation I had stored up in my mind during my travels, deep buried there during my silence but now coming to vigorous eloquent life again on my lips. And this wonder that I felt must have lent extraordinary color and enthusiasm to my narratives. From the pleasure the two ladies evidently took in the things I described, I came little by little to experience a sort of mournful regret that

I had not myself been able to enjoy them more; and this undertone of nostalgic yearning added another charm to my story.

After a few evenings, Miss Caporale's attitude toward me, as well as the expression on her face, changed radically. The heavy languor now veiling her great sorrowful bulging eyes made them look more than ever
like doll's eyes opening and closing with lead weights inside her head; and this strident sentimentality strengthened the contrast between them and her blank masklike face.

There was no doubt about it: Silvia Caporale was falling in love with me!

The naive surprise this discovery gave me was proof certain, to myself, that I had not at all been talking for her, all that while, but for the other, the little girl, who sat there by the hour listening silently and attentively. Adriana, for that matter, seemed to have understood so, too; for by a sort of tacit agreement we began smiling to one another at the comic and quite unforeseen effects my chats were having on the heart-strings of this susceptible old maid of the piano lessons.

* * *

Yet this second discovery, I must hasten to caution, awakened in me only thoughts of the most tender purity as regards my little house-mother. How could such innocence, touched with its delicate suffusion of sadness, inspire any others? What joy it gave me that first proof of confidence, a proof as overt, yet as diffident, as her childish bashfulness would allow! Now it would be a fleeting glance, the flash across her features of a softer beauty; now it would be a smile of mortified pity for the absurd fatuity of the older woman—or, indeed, a reproof darted at me from her eyes, or suggested by a toss of her head, when I, for our secret amusement, would go

a little too far in paying out string to the falcon of that poor woman's hopes, a falcon which now soared high and free in the heavens of beatitude or now flapped and fluttered in distress at some sudden pull toward the solid earth that I would give.

"You cannot be a man of much heart," Miss Caporale remarked on one occasion, "if it is true, as you say—not that I believe you—that you have gone along immune through all your life!"

"Immune, signorina? Immune from what?" "You know very well from what! I mean, without falling in love!"

"Oh never, signorina, never, never, never!" "Well, how about that ring that grew so tight you had to have it filed off? Never, never, never, never?" "Oh, it began to hurt, you see. I thought I told you! But anyhow, it was a present from my grandfather!"

"What a whopper!"

"True as preaching! Why, I can even tell you when and where. Kather amusing, too, at that! It was at Florence, and grandpa and I were coming out of the Uffizi. You could never guess why I got the ring! It was because I—I was twelve years old at the time, by the way—I had mistaken a Perugino for a Raphael. Just so, signorina! I made the mistake, and as a reward for making it, I got the ring—Grandpa bought it at one of the booths on the Ponte Vecchio! As I later learned, grandpa, for reasons best known to himself, had made up his mind that that particular picture had been falsely attributed to Perugino and really belonged to Raphael! Hence his delight at my blunder! Well now, you understand, there's some difference between the hand of a boy twelve years old and this paddle I have at present. Notice how big it is? You can't just see a baby ring on such a paw, can you? But you say I have no heart, signorina. That's probably an exaggeration. I have one; but I have also a little common sense. You see, I look at myself in

the mirror—through these glasses which, being dark, tend to soften the shock—and I wilt, signorina, I wilt. ‘Look a-here, Adriano, old fellow,’ I say to myself, ‘you don’t seriously think a woman is ever going to fall for that face!'”

“Why the idea!” exclaimed the old maid. “You pretend to be doing justice to yourself in that kind of talk? Anyway, you are very unjust toward us women. Because, take my word for it, Mr. Meis, women are more generous than men; they don’t attach so much importance to good looks which, after all, are only skin deep!”

“Yes, but I’m afraid they’d have to be more courageous than men, too, before I would have any chance. It would take a pretty desperate valor to face a prospect like me!”

“Oh, get out, Mr. Meis; you enjoy depreciating yourself, I am sure. You say you are uglier than you really are; and I believe you try to make yourself uglier than you really are!”

“You hit it right, that time. And do you know why I do? To escape being pitied by people! If I tried to dandy up a bit, do you know what folks would say? ‘See that poor devil! He thinks a mustache can help that face of his!’ Whereas, this way, no trouble! A scarecrow—but a frank honest-to-God one—with no pretensions! Admit that I am right, signorina!”

The piano teacher sighed expressively:

“I’ll admit you’re all wrong. I don’t say a mustache, perhaps; but if you tried growing a Vandyke, let us say, you would soon see what a distinguished and even handsome man you could be!”

“And this eye of mine, if you please?”

“Oh well, if we are going to talk that frankly—do you know, I have been thinking of making the suggestion for some days past! Why don’t you have an operation, to set it straight? Perfectly simple matter! Hardly any inconvenience at all; and

in a few days you are rid of this last slight imperfection!”

“Aha, I’ve caught you!” said I. “Women may be more generous than men, signorina, but I must point out to you that, a touch here and a touch there, you have been making me a whole new face!”

Why had I so deliberately prolonged this conversation? Did I, forAdriana’s benefit, really want the Caporale woman to say in so many words, that she could love me, indeed that she actually did love me, in spite of my insignificant chin and my vagrant eye? No, that was not the reason: I fomented all those questions and answers because I observed the pleasure that Adriana, perhaps unconsciously, kept experiencing every time the music teacher refuted me triumphantly!

So I understood that, despite my odd appearance, the girl might be able to love me. I did not say as much even to myself; but from that evening the bed I slept on in that house seemed softer to me, the objects in my room more homelike and familiar, lighter the air I breathed, bluer the sky, more glorious the sun! Though I still pretended to myself that the change all came about because the late Mattia Pascal had died his miserable death back there in the mill-flume of “The Coops”; and because I, Adriano Meis, after a year of aimless wandering in the boundless uncharted freedom I had found, was at last getting to my course, attaining the ideal I had set before me to become another man, to live another life—a life which I could now feel gushing vibrant, palpitant, within me!

And the poison of depression with which bitter experience had filled me was expelled from my soul and body: I became gay again as I had been in the days of my boyhood. Even Anselmo Paleari ceased to be the bore I had found him at first, the gloom of his philosophy evaporating under the sunlight of my new joy.

Poor old Anselmo! Of the two things which, according to him,

were proper matters for concern to people on this earth, he did not realize that he was thinking by this time of only one! But, come now, be honest! Hadn't he thought of living too, in his better days? Just a little?

More deserving of pity than he, surely, was the _maestra_ Caporale who failed to find even in wine the gaiety of that unforgettable drunkard of the Borgo Nuovo! She yearned to live, poor thing; and she thoughtit was unkind of men to fix only on the beauty that was skin deep! So she supposed her soul, away down underneath, was a beautiful thing, probably! And who knows? Perhaps she might be capable of many, and even great, sacrifices,—of giving up her wine, for example—once she found a truly "generous" man.

"If to err is human," I reflected, "ought we not conclude that justice is a supreme cruelty?"

I resolved, at any rate, to be cruel no longer toward Miss Silvia Caporale; resolved, I say; for I was cruel, nevertheless, without meaning to be, and the more cruel the less I meant to be. My affability proved to be fresh fuel for the flames of her very unstable passion; and we were soon at this pass: that everything I said would bring a pallor to her cheeks, and a blush to the cheeks of Adriana. There was nothing deliberate in my choice of words or subjects; but I was sure that nothing I was saying had the effect, whether by its tone or by its manner of expression, of rousing this girl (to whom I was really speaking all the while) to such an extent as to break the harmony which in our good way had been established between us.

Souls have some mysterious device for finding each other out while our exterior selves are still entangled in the formalities of conventional discourse. They have needs and aspirations of their own which, in view of the impossibility of satisfying those needs and of realizing those aspirations, our bodies refuse to recognize. And that is why two people,

whose souls are talking to each other, experience an intolerable embarrassment, a violent repulsion against any kind of material contact, when they are left alone somewhere; though theatmosphere clears again, the moment a third person intervenes. Then the uneasiness vanishes, the two souls find instant relief, resume their intercourse, smiling at each other from a safe distance.

How often was this the case with me and Adrians, her distress, however, coming from the shyness, the unassuming modesty, native to her; while mine, as I believed, was due to the remorse I felt at the lie I was obliged to live, imposing my devious and complicated fictioning upon the ingenuity and candid innocence of that sweet, gentle, defenceless creature!

For a month past she had been quite transfigured in my eyes. And was she not a different girl, in fact? Was there not an inner glow in the fugitive glances she now gave me? And her smiles—did not their lighter, wore wholesome joy bear witness that she was finding her life as a drudge more bearable, that she was wearing more naturally that demeanor as a responsible grown-up housekeeper which had at first so much amused me?

Ah yes, perhaps she was instinctively yielding to the need I myself felt of dreaming of a new life, without trying to think out what that life must be, nor how it could be made possible. A vague yearning, in her case as in mine, had opened, for her as for me, a window on the future, through which a flood of intoxicating joyous light was streaming—neither of us daring to approach the window, meantime, whether to draw the shutters or to see just what the prospect beyond might be.

Our pure and exhilarating happiness had its secondary effects on poor Silvia also.

“By the way, signorina,” I said to her one evening; “do you know I have almost made up my mind to follow your advice?”

“What advice?” she asked.

“To have an operation on my eye.”

She clapped her hands gaily:

“Oh, that’s such good news. Go to Doctor Ambrosini—he’s the best one in town. He did a cataract for my poor mamma once. What did I tell you, Adriana? The mirror did settle the question! I was sure it would!”

Adriana smiled, as I did.

“It wasn’t the mirror, though, signorina,” I observed. “It’s a matter of necessity. My eye has been giving me some trouble recently. It was never of much use to me; but I shouldn’t care to lose it.”

And I was lying! It was just as Miss Caporale had said it was: the looking-glass did convince me. The looking-glass told me that if a relatively simple operation could obliterate the one particularly odious feature bequeathed to Adriano Meis by the late Mattia Pascal, the former might then dispense with the blue glasses also, take on a bit of mustache again, and, in general, bring his unfortunate physiognomy into reasonably close alignment with the inner transformation of his outlook on life!

* * *

This blissful state of mind was to be rudely disturbed by a scene which I witnessed, a few nights later, concealed behind the shutters of one of my windows.

I had been on the balcony with the two ladies until nearly ten o ‘clock. Then I retired to my room and was reading with more or less interest a favorite book of old Anselmo—“Reincarnation.”

Suddenly I thought I heard voices outside on the balcony; and I listened to discover whether Adriana’s was among them. No: there were two people, talking in suppressed tones but with

some animation. One was a man: and his voice was not that of Paleari. Since there were, to my knowledge, no other males in the house except myself, my curiosity was aroused. I stepped to the window, and peered out through one of the openings in the shutters.

Dark as it was, I thought I could recognize Silvia Caporale in the woman; but who was the man she was talking with? Could Terenzio Papiano have returned, unexpectedly, from Naples?

Something the piano teacher said in a louder tone than usual gave me to understand that they were discussing me. I crowded closer to the shutters and listened anxiously.

The man seemed angry at whatever the woman had been saying about me; and she was now evidently trying to attenuate the unfavorable impression her words had given.

“Rich?” I finally heard the man ask.

“That I can’t say!” the woman replied. “It looks as though he were. He lives on whatever he has, without working…”

“Always about the house?”

“Why no! But anyhow, you will see him tomorrow yourself.”

The “you” was a “tu,” in the intimate Italian form. So she knew him as well as that! Could Papiano (there was no longer any doubt that it was he) be the lover of Miss Silvia Caporale? And, in that case, why had she been so much taken up with me during all this time?

My curiosity was now at fever heat, but as luck would have it, they talked on in a much lower and quite inaudible tone of voice.

Not being able to hear anything, I tried to do what I could with my eyes. Suddenly I saw the music teacher lay a hand on Papiano’s shoulder, an attention which he rudely rebuffed

before long. When the Caporale woman spoke again she raised her voice in evident exasperation:

“But how could I help it? Who am I? What do I represent in this
house?”

“You tell Adriana to start herself out here,” the man ordered sharply.

Hearing the girl’s name pronounced in that manner, I clenched my fists, my blood running cold in my veins.

“But she’s in bed!” said Silvia.

The man answered angrily, threateningly:

“Well, get her out of bed, and be quick about it, too.”

I don’t know how I kept from throwing the shutters open. The effort I made to control myself, however, cleared my head for an instant; and the words which Silvia Caporale had uttered in such irritation about herself came to my own lips:

“Who am I? What do I represent in this house?”

I drew back from the window. But then a justification for my eavesdropping occurred to me: those two people had been talking of me. Whatever they were saying was my legitimate concern, therefore; and now they were going to talk of the same matter with Adriana. I had a right to know what that fellow’s attitude was toward me!

The readiness with which I seized on this excuse for my indelicate conduct in spying on people without their knowing suddenly revealed to me that greater than my anxiety about myself was my interest at that moment in some one else.

I went back to my post behind the shutters.

The Caporale woman had disappeared; the man, all alone, was

leaning with his elbows on the railing of the balcony, looking down into the water, his head sunk nervously between his two hands.

An eye to an opening in the shutters, my hands clutching at my two knees, I stood there waiting in indescribable anxiety for Adriana to come out on the balcony. The fact that she was slow in doing so did not exasperate me at all; on the contrary it gave me the greatest satisfaction. I guessed, I don't know why, that Adriana was refusing to do the bidding of this bully. In fact I could imagine Silvia Caporale urging her, begging her, beseeching her to obey.

The man, meantime, stood there at the railing, fuming with anger and impatience. I was hoping that the woman would come back eventually to say that Adriana was unwilling to get up. But no, here she was, herself, the teacher appearing in the doorway behind her!

Papiano turned on the two women:

"You go to bed," he ordered, speaking to Silvia. "I have something to say to my sister-in-law."

The woman withdrew.

Papiano now stepped over to close the folding door that opened from the dining room out on the balcony.

"No you don't!" said Adriana, backing up against the door.

"But I have something to say to you!" the man uttered vehemently under his breath, trying to make as little noise as possible.

"Well, say it!" said Adriana. "What do you want? You might have waited till morning!"

"No, I am going to say it now!" And he seized her violently by one arm, dragging her forward on the balcony.

“Let me alone,” Adriana screamed, struggling to release his hold.

I slammed the shutters back, and appeared at the window:

“Oh, Mr. Meis,” called Adriana. “Will you please step out here!”

“Very gladly, signorina!” I answered.

My heart leapt with a thrill of grateful joy! In a bound I was out into the corridor leading to the dining room.

But there, near the entrance to my room, coiled, as it were, on a trunk that had been just brought in, was a slender, light-haired youth, with a very long and seemingly transparent face, barely opening a pair of languid stupefied blue eyes.

I drew up with a start, and looked at him. A thought flashed through my mind: “The brother of Papiano, Adriana once mentioned!” I hurried on and came out on the balcony.

“May I introduce my brother-in-law, Mr. Meis? Terenzio Papiano! He has just come in from Naples.”

“Delighted! Most happy!” the man exclaimed, taking of his hat, slouching through a reptilian how, and pressing my hand warmly. “I’m sorry I have been away tfrom Rome all this time; but I trust my little sister here has looked after you satisfactorily? If you need anything for your room, I hope you will feel quite free in letting me know…. Is your work table just what you need? I thought perhaps a broader one might serve your purposes better…. But if there’s anything else…. We like to do our best by the guests who honor us…”

“Thank you, thank you,” I interrupted. “I am quite comfortable! Thank you!”

“Thank you, rather…. Or, if I can be of any service in any other way…. I have some connections. … But Adriana, dear, I

woke you up. Run along back to bed, if you're sleepy…!"

"Oh," said Adriana, smiling her usual sad smile, "now that I'm up again…"

And she stepped to the railing, looking out over the water.

I felt instinctively that she did not want to leave me alone with the man. What was she afraid of?

She stood there leaning meditatively against the parapet; while the man, with his hat still in his hand, kept up a stream of chatter. Had been to Naples—detained there much longer than he had been expecting. And such a lot of work! Copying documents, you see, bundles of them, in the private archives of her Excellency the Duchess, Donna Teresa Ravasehieri Fieschi—"Mamma Duchessa," as everybody called her, though "Mamma Big Heart" would have been a better name! Papers of extraordinary interest, from certain points of view: new light on the overthrow of the Two Sicilies, and especially on the role in that episode of Gaetano Pi. langieri, prince of Satriano, whose life the Marquis Giglio (don Ignazio Giglio d'Auletta, that is—he, Papiano, was the private secretary of the Marquis) was intending to illuminate in a very careful and sincere biography! Sincere—let us be frank!—sincere, so far as the Marquis's devotion and loyalty to the old Bourbons would permit….

The man seemed to have been wound up. There was no stopping him. He liked to hear himself talk, orating, almost, with the mannerisms of an experienced actor, a dramatic pause here, a subdued chuckle there, an expressive gesture in some other place.

I could not master my astonishment. I stood there rigid as a block of stone, nodding every now and then at the lecturer, but with my eyes on Adriana, who was still leaning against the railing, looking out over the river.

“After all, what can a fellow do!” Papiano intoned, for a peroration. “The Marquis is a Bourbon and a Clerical; while I, I, you understand—I am almost afraid to say it out loud in my own house!—I, well, every morning before I go to work, I step out here and wave my hand to Garibaldi up there on the Janiculum—ever notice his statue?—Good view of it from just here! Well, ‘Hooray for the Twentieth of September,’ say I; but I have to be secretary to the Marquis just the same. Fine fellow, and all that; but Bourbon, Clerical, Clerical, Bourbon, as bad as they make ’em. Well, bread and butter! You’ve got to live in this world… Really, when I hear him carrying on, sometimes, I, as a good Italian, I feel like spitting on the fellow—if you’ll pardon my strong language. Makes me sick, this reactionary stuff! But it’s a matter of bread and butter. So I stick it out! Yes, bread and butter talks…”

He shrugged his shoulders, struck his hands to his hips with a broad sweep suggesting helplessness, and laughed.

“Come, come, sisterchen,” said he, running over to Adriana and putting his two hands gently on her shoulders, “time to be crawling in, isn’t it? It’s getting late; and I imagine Mr. Meis is tired too.”

In bidding me good night at the door of my room, Adriana pressed my hand—something she had never done before; and I remember that, left alone, I kept my hand closed as though to preserve the sensation of that pressure.

All night long I lay awake thinking, a prey to indescribable anxiety. The ceremonious hypocrisy of the man, his insinuating, loquacious servility, the hostility I had discovered in him by my eavesdropping! He would certainly compel me to leave that house where, profiting by the dotage of the old man, he was certainly trying to make himself master. Just how would he go about getting me out? Some idea of his tactics I might have from his abrupt change of manner

that evening when I appeared on the balcony. But why should he object to my presence there? Why was I not a roomer like any other? What could that Caporale woman have said to him about me? Could he be jealous of her?

Or was he jealous of someone else? His arrogant suspicious manner; his rude dismissal of the music teacher to get Adriana alone with him; the violence with which he addressed the girl; her refusal to come out, and coming out, to let him close the door behind her; the emotion she had previously shown every time her absent brother-in-law was mentioned—yes, everything, everything filled me with the hateful suspicion that he had designs on her.

Well, why should that upset me so? After all, was it not easy for me to move away, if the fellow gave me the slightest annoyance? What was there to keep me? Nothing whatever! And yet what a tender thrill I felt as I remembered how Adriana had called to me from the balcony, as though asking me to protect her. And in bidding me good night how she had pressed my hand!

I had not closed the blinds of my room nor drawn the curtains. The moon rose, and as it sank toward morning, in the west, it appeared at my window, looked in upon me, to laugh at me, as it seemed, for finding me still awake:

“Ah, I understand, I understand, my boy. But you don’t, do you! Oh no, you don’t understand, you rascal!”

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

««« Pirandello in English

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