The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 13 – The red lantern

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

The Late Mattia Pascal
Chapter 13
The red lantern

Forty days in the dark!

Successful, the operation; oh, I should say so: a great success! Though the eye, perhaps, would be a wee wee bit bigger than the other!

Meantime, forty days in the dark, in my room!

I had occasion to find out for myself now that when a man is in pain he acquires a very individual notion of good and evil: of the good, that is, which people ought to do to him, and to which he thinks he has a right, as though suffering entitled him to compensation; and of the evil which he can do to

others, as though a privilege for doing so derived from that same suffering. With the result that he accuses them for the good they fail to do to him as is their duty; and excuses himself for the wrong he does to them as is his right.

After a week or so of that black confinement, my desire, the need I felt, for being somehow comforted increased to exasperation. I did realize, to be sure, that I was in a strange house and that therefore I should be grateful for the solicitous care my hosts took of me. But they did not seem to me sufficient, these attentions; rather they grated on my nerves, as though they were paid me out of spite. Of course they did! Because I understood from whom they came. Through them Adriana meant me to know that she was with me there, in her thoughts, all day long. A jolly consolation that, I must say! What good were her bally thoughts, if mine, all the meanwhile, were ever out in anguished search of her, here and there through the house! She alone could comfort me; and it was her duty to! She must have understood better than anybody else how dull it all was, how lonesome I must be feeling, how I longed to see her, or at least be conscious of her presence near me!

To my nervous irritation, was added a sullen rage on my learning that Pantogada had left Kome almost immediately. Would I ever have consented to such torture—forty livelong days in worse than jail!—if I had known that idiot were going away so soon, bless his soul!

To cheer me up, old Anselmo Paleari tried to show me, by a long disquisition, that the dark was quite imaginary on my part:

“Imaginary?” I stormed furiously; “Imaginary? Glad you think so!”

“Now wait just a moment; and I’ll make clear just what I mean!”

Perhaps to prepare me for a spiritualistic seance which, to take my mind off: my troubles, he seemed inclined to hold in my room, he expounded a very unusual system of metaphysics which he had thought out—all by himself—a sort of lanternosophy, one might have called it.

Every now and then, as he talked, the old man would stop to ask me:

“Are you asleep, Mr. Meis!”

More than once I was tempted to answer: “Yes, thank heaven!”

But since I could not fail to recognize that his intentions were of the best—the idea of helping me pass my time more pleasantly—I would answer:

“No, my dear Paleari, I am listening! Most instructive! Please continue!”

And he continued.

“We,” said he, “for our misfortune, are not like trees, let us say which live without consciousness and to which the earth, the sunshine, the air, the rain, the wind, the snow, are nothing which the tree itself is not—but just something harmful or beneficial merely, if you understand me. We humans, on coming into the world, find we have one sorry privilege—the privilege of feeling ourselves live, with all the fine illusions that follow as a consequence, the illusion, in particular, that this inner experience we have of a life forever varied and changing—changing according to time, circumstance, or fortuity—is a reality outside ourselves.

“Whereas this sense we have of life is a lantern, as it were, which each of us carries within himself. Now this lantern, with its faint light, reveals to us that we are lost, astray, on the face of the earth, showing us the good and the evil on every hand. Why not? Our lanterns cast about us a greater or a

lesser area of light, beyond which all is blank darkness. Now this fearful gloom would not exist were our lanterns not there to make us conscious of it; though we must believe it is a real darkness, so long as our lights are aglow within us. Well now, imagine that our lamps are blown out; this fictitious darkness will engulf us entirely, will it not? After our cloudy day of illusion, perpetual night! But is it really perpetual night? Or is it simply that we have fallen into the arms of Essence which has broken down the insubstantial forms of our Reason?—Are you asleep, Mr. Meis?"

"Please go on, my dear Paleari! I was never more awake! I can almost see those lanterns you are talking about!"

"Very well then…. But you have one eye out of commission, remember! We had better not get too deeply involved in philosophy. Supposing we amuse ourselves just following these wandering fire-flies—our various lanterns, that is—as they stray this way and that in the darkness of human destiny. In the first place they are of many different colors—according to the kind of glass which Illusion—a great dealer in colored spectacles—supplies us to view things through. It's an idea of mine, however, that in certain eras of history, Mr. Meis, as in certain periods of our individual lives, certain colors tend to predominate, eh? At a given epoch in history, certain common prejudices, certain common ways of thinking, seem to prevail among men, which color the globes of those—I will say—searchlights, beacons, rather than lanterns, which the great abstractions constitute—Truth, Virtue, Beauty, Honor, and so on. Don't you think, for instance, that the beacon of Pagan Virtue was colored red? Whereas that of Christian Virtue must have been violet—something gloomy, depressing, I mean to suggest. The flame of the common idea is fed, nourished, kept alive, by the oil of collective agreement on certain fundamental things; but let this unanimity, this consensus, be broken down—well, the reflector, the globe, the abstract term, remains, I grant you; but the flame inside, the flame of the

idea, begins to sputter and spit—and this happens in all the so-called periods of transition. Not infrequently in history there come sudden violent gusts, certain world-wide brain-storms, that extinguish all the great beacons of Truth at the same moment! What a time! What a time! In the darkness everywhere prevailing now, our individual lanterns go scampering around this way and that in the greatest confusion—this one forward, this one backward, this one round and round in a circle;—they collide, they dodge each other, they gather together in groups of ten, twenty, or a hundred; but there is no guide to the certain road to verity: they cannot agree; they quarrel, and argue, and dispute, and finally scatter again in all directions. Panic! Chaos! Anarchy! Bewilderment!

“Now, it seems to me, Mr. Meis, that we ourselves are now living in one of those periods of transition. Doubt, confusion, perplexity on every hand. All the great beacons darkened! All the landmarks gone! Whom shall we follow? Which way shall we go? Backwards, perhaps? Shall we gather about the little lamps we find hanging to the gravestones of our illustrious dead? Do you remember what Niccolo Tommaseo said in one of his poems—a good poet was Tommaseo, in spite of his dictionary—that the flame in his lantern was not big enough perhaps to set the world on fire, but that it still might serve for greater men than he to light their wicks from? Which is all very well, provided you’ve got plenty of oil in your own lantern! But many people haven’t, Mr. Meis! Many people haven’t! So what do they do?

“Well, certain of them go to the churches, don’t they? to get enough oil to last their time out—poor old men and poor old women, for the most part, whom life has played false and who grope their way forward in the gloom of existence, their faith lighting their humble pathway like a votive candle. How carefully they shield their feeble lantern from the blasts of final disillusionment, hoping and praying their wicks will not

die out till they reach their journey's end. Closing their ears to the blasphemous clamor of the world about them, they keep their eyes fixed on the light in their hands, reassuring themselves that it will be bright enough for God to notice them.

"The faint but unfaltering glow of some of these humble lanterns arouses a certain anguished envy in many of us, Mr. Meis; though others, who think they are chosen favorites of the Zeus Thunderer of Science and are sure that the Almighty has equipped their automobiles with the most modern electric headlights, hava a disdainful pity for them. For my part, I say nothing positive, Mr. Meis—I just ask a little question: supposing all this darkness, this great engulfing mystery in which the philosophers of the ages have speculated in vain and which Science, though it refuses to investigate it, does not preclude, were, after all, only a delusion, a fiction of our minds, a fancy we are somehow unable to brighten with gay colors? Supposing we could convince ourselves that all this mystery should prove not to exist at all outside of us but only in us—and as a necessary compensation for our having that lantern I have been talking about, that sense of life, I mean, which it is our unhappy privilege to possess? Supposing, in a word, that there were no such thing as this death which fills us with such terror, that death should prove to be not the extinction of life but a gust of wind, merely, which blows out the light in our lantern, extinguishes this dolorous, painful, terrifying sense of life we have—terrifying, because it is limited, narrowed, fenced in by the circle of fictitious darkness that begins just where the light from our lantern stops. We think of ourselves as fireflies astray in this darkness, desperately casting about us tiny circles of radiance which are powerless to dispel the gloom, and which are, as it were, our prisons cutting us off from the universal, the eternal life to which we shall some day be allowed to return. Whereas, in point of fact, we are part of that greater life already, and always shall be, but henceforth

without, let us hope, that feeling of exile and exclusion which torments us so. No, Mr. Meis, the fence about us is wholly illusory, something proportionate to the strength of the light, of the individuality, within us. I don't know whether you will like the notion—but the fact is that we have always lived and always shall live at one with the Universe. Right now, in our present bodily forms, we participate in all the manifestations of Universal Life. We are not aware of this—it does not force itself upon our attention; because, unfortunately, this puny weepy little lantern of ours reveals to us only the amount that it can actually illuminate. But worse than that, it does not show things as they really are; on the contrary, it colors them in its own blessed way; so that now our hair stands on end at certain prospects which, were our bodily forms somewhat different, would only amuse us! Amuse us, I mean, because they would all seem so simple then that we should laugh at the strange terrors they once had for us!…"

Since Mr. Anselmo Paleari had such scant regard for the little colored lanterns we each have in us, I could not help wondering just why he was so anxious to light another—with a red globe—right there in my sick-room. Weren't the two we had between us making trouble enough already?

I decided to put the question to him.

"_Similia similibus_…" he answered. "One lantern corrects the other. Besides, the red lantern I am going to light goes out at a certain point, you know!…"

"But do you really think," I ventured further, "that this device of yours is the best means for discovering something?"

"What scientists call 'light,'" rejoined Anselmo, not in the least disturbed, "may give us a very inadequate and deceptive notion of the thing they call 'life'; but for what is beyond the latter it not only does not help but, believe me, actually

hinders. There are a few charlatans of science, with intellects as insignificant as their impulses are perverse, who claim, for their own conveniences, that such experiments as those I perform with my red lantern are an insult to Science and to Nature herself. Heaven help us, Mr. Meis! Such nonsense! No, we are trying simply to discover other laws, other forces, evidences of another life, in this same Nature—the very same Nature, mark me!—seeking by methods supplementing those normally used, to go beyond the very narrow comprehension of things that our frail senses ordinarily furnish. I ask you—don't these same scientists demand the right environment, the proper conditions, for their experiments? Can a photographer do without his dark chamber? Well then! … Besides, there are all sorts of ways to test results and check up on trickery;…"

But Anselmo, as I had occasion to observe some evenings later, did not see fit to use any of these—probably because his experiments were just a private family affair. Could he have the least reason to suspect that Miss Caporale and Papiano were having their fun with him? Besides, why be so particular anyhow? These seances were not for the purpose of convincing him—he was sure already! The best-natured simpleton who ever lived, he never once dreamed that his son-in-law and the piano teacher had any ulterior motives in attending his meetings. If results were pitiably meagre and petty, he had his theosophy, to write into these the most plausible and portentous significances. Why ask for anything better? Since he had no medium handy, we had no right to expect that the Beings dwelling on the higher, the Mental Plane, could be brought down to communicate with us. We should be mighty glad to get the halting and imperfect manifestions of the dead who were still nearest our own lowly sphere—on the Astral Plane, that is.

Who could refute him in such an argument? [Footnote: Note of Don Eligio Pelegrinotto: "'Faith,' wrote Albertus Florentinus

Magister, ‘is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.'”]

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I knew that Adriana had always refused to take part in these “experiments.” Ever since I had been shut up there in my room she had come in but rarely (and invariably when someone else was present) to ask me how I was getting along. Such inquiries seemed to be the mere politeness which in fact they were. She knew very well how I was getting along! I even thought I could detect a note of mischievous irony in her voice; since she, of course, could not have the least idea of my real reasons for suddenly deciding on this operation—an operation, which, as she must have concluded, was a matter of vanity on my part, an attempt to look more handsome, or at least less ugly, by having my face remodeled along the lines suggested by Miss Silvia Caporale!

“I’m getting along fine, signorina,” I would answer. “I can’t see a blessed thing!”

“But you’ll see better, much better, later on,” Papiano would then observe.

In the dark there I would clench a fist and shake it in his direction. How I should have liked to drive it home! He was surely saying such things to make me lose the little good humor I still managed to preserve. He could not possibly help noticing the dislike I had for his visits—I showed it in every way, yawning, gaping, grunting, strictly avoiding all amenities. But there he stuck, just the same, coming in to see me every evening (without Adriana, of course—leave that to him!), and sitting there for hour after hour, boring me past endurance with his endless chatter. His voice coming out at me in the darkness made me twist and turn on my chair and sink my nails into my palms. I could have strangled him at certain moments. And could he not sense all this? Could he not feel

it? I thought he could; for just at such times his voice would soften and take on its most caressing and soothing tones!

We always have to hold someone responsible for our trials and tribulations. Papiano, so I decided, was doing his best to get me out of the house; and had the voice of common sense been able to make itself heard in my for that I should have been heartily grateful to him. But how could I listen to common sense, if common sense was talking to me through the mouth of such a fellow—who, in my judgment was wrong, patently wrong, despicably wrong? He wanted to get rid of me, I concluded in my rage, in order to fleece Paleari at leisure and encompass Adriana's ruin. That was all his interminable prattle meant to me! Was it possible that any decent counsel could come from the lips of a man like Papiano?

Though perhaps all this was the way I chose to excuse myself for not mastering emotions which came in reality, neither from my dark confinement nor even from the weariness I felt at Papiano's constant talking and talking!

He talked—oh, he talked of Pepita Pantogada, evening after evening.

Though there could have been nothing in my style of living to suggest such a thing, he had taken it into his head that I was a very wealthy man; and now, to get my mind off Adriana, he was perhaps flirting with the notion of interesting me in the granddaughter of the Marquis Giglio d'Auletta. He described her to me as a very strict and very uppish young lady, brimful of intelligence and determination, energetic in her ways, outspoken and decisive in conversation; a beautiful girl, besides—oh, as for that, a prize-winner—dark hair,
slender (a jolly armful, nevertheless), bubbling with life, two dazzling black eyes, and lips—well, let's say nothing about her lips. Nor about the dowry, either—nothing to speak of, the dowry, beyond the whole estate of the Marquis! Who, for his part, would be very glad to have a husband in sight

for the girl, not only to be well rid of Pantogada, but because he didn't get along so very well with Pepita herself! A quiet, easy-going sort of fellow was the Marquis, interested in the things and the people of the old days; while Pepita—she was strong, assertive, full of vitality and spirit.

Didn't Papiano understand that the more he praised Pepita to me, the greater my dislike for her became, even before I had set eyes upon her? I would meet her some evening soon, he said, because he would eventually persuade her to attend one of the seances; and he would introduce me to the Marquis also; for the Marquis was very keen to make my acquaintance, after all that he, Papiano, had said of me. Unfortunately the Marquis never went out anywhere, had renounced society, in fact; and of spiritualistic meetings in particular he could not approve because of his religious views.

"How is that?" I asked. "He lets his granddaughter go to places where he would not go himself?"

"But he knows who it is she's going with!" Papiano exclaimed proudly.

That was enough for me. Why should Adriana, out of religious scruples, refuse to do something which Pepita could do with the full consent of a pious Clerical grandparent? I seized upon the argument and tried to persuade her to be present at the first sitting.

She had come to see me with her father, the evening before the seance.

"It's the same old story," Anselmo sighed, on hearing my proposal. "Religion, Mr. Meis, behaves just like Science when it comes to this question—pricking up its donkey ears and rearing on its hind legs. And yet, as I have explained to my daughter a hundred times, our experiments conflict with neither the one nor the other; in fact, as far as religion is concerned, they demonstrate one of the truths fundamental to

religion."

"But supposing I should be afraid?" Adriana objected.

"Afraid of what?" snapped the father. "Of being convinced?"

"Or of the dark?" I added. "We are all going to be here, signorina. Will you be the only one to miss the party?"

"But I…" answered Adriana, hard pressed, "I … well, I don't take any stock in it, there… I don't believe in it, I can't believe in it; and… well, never mind…!"

She was unable to explain further; but from the tone of her voice and her hesitation, I was certain that something besides scruples of faith was keeping Adriana from the seance. The fear she alleged as an excuse might have causes which Anselmo did not suspect! Or was it simply humiliation at the miserable spectacle her father offered in letting himself be so stupidly taken in by Papiano and Silvia Caporale?

I did not have the heart to insist further; but Adriana seemed to understand intuitively the disappointment which her refusal occasioned me. She dropped an "However"… which I caught on the wing:

"Ah, splendid! So you'll come, then!"

"Perhaps just for once—tomorrow," she yielded, with a laugh.

It was late in the afternoon, on the following day, when Papiano came to prepare the terrain. He brought in a small square table of rough unvarnished pine, without drawers; a guitar; a dog collar with bells, and a few other articles. Removing the furniture from one corner of my room, he stretched a string from moulding to moulding, and from the string he hung a sheet of white cloth. This work was done, I need not say, by the light of the red lantern, and to the accompaniment as also I need not say, of incessant gabbling.

“This sheet is for… well, it’s the accumulator,_ let’s call it that—of this mysterious energy. You just watch it, Mr. Meis; and you’ll see it shake and tremble, swelling out now and then like a sail, and lighting up with a strange unearthly glow. Oh yes! We never get any real ‘materializations’; but lights—plenty of lights. You’ll see for yourself, if Miss Caporale is in her usual form this evening. She’s in touch with the spirit of an old school-mate of hers at the Conservatory. He died of consumption—bad business, consumption—at the age of eighteen…. Came from… I forget just where—Basel, in Switzerland, I believe it was; but he lived here in Rome a long time with his family. A man of promise, a real genius—nipped in the bud! At least, so Silvia says. You know, she was in communication with Max… the name was Max… wait, what was it?… Max Oliz… yes, that’s it… Oliz or something of the sort… even before she realized she had any gifts as a medium. According to her story, she would sit down at a piano… and his spirit would take possession of her;… and she would play and play … improvising, understand… till she fainted dead away. Why, one evening, a crowd of people gathered under the window, and clapped and cheered and cheered and clapped…”

“And Miss Caporale was afraid…,” I added, placidly.

“Oh, so you know then!” exclaimed Papiano, stopping short.

“Yes, she told me about it. So I am to conclude that the applause was for Mr. Max’s music played through the young lady?”

“That’s the idea! Pity we haven’t a piano in the house. We have to do what we can with the guitar—just the suggestion of a movement—a note or two, you see. It’s pretty hard on Max, I can tell you. Sometimes he gets all worked up, and the way he pulls at the strings!… But, you wait till this evening, and you can hear for yourself…. There, I guess we’re about ready now…”

“But, would you mind, Mr. Papiano,” I decided to ask, before he got away; “I was wondering… do you take all this seriously? You really believe in it…”

“Why, it’s this way, Mr. Meis,” said he, as though he had been expecting the question, “I can’t say I believe exactly…. Fact is, I just don’t see through it all…”

“Too dark, I suppose!…”

“Oh no, not that…. The phenomena, the manifestations, themselves, are real, there’s no denying that. … And here in our own house, we can’t suspect each other’s good faith…”

“Why not?”

“What do you mean, ‘why not’?”

“Why, it’s very easy to deceive yourself, especially when you’re anxious to believe something…”

“Well, I’m not so anxious, you know… on the contrary, if anything! My father-in-law, who makes a study of such things… yes, he believes in it… but with me you see… well, I just haven’t the time.. let alone the interest. What with those blessed Bourbons of the Marquis, that keep me up to my neck in work…. Oh, I spend an evening this way, once in a while…. But my honest opinion is that so long as the Good Lord lets us live, we can know nothing really about death…. So why bother?… Let’s get the best out of living, is what I say, Mr. Meis. So there you have how I feel about it. Now I’ll just drop around to the _via dei Pontefici_ and get Miss Pantogada… and we’re ready, eh?”

When he came back, a half hour or more later, he seemed quite annoyed: along with Pepita and her governess, a certain Spanish painter put in an appearance, who was introduced to me, without much cordiality, as Manuel Bernaldez, a friend of the Giglio’s. He spoke Italian perfectly; but there was no way

to make him recognize the “s” on the end of my name. When he came to that harmless consonant, he seemed to halt as if it were going to burn his tongue:

“Adriano _Mei_,” he repeated several times, in a manner that struck me as too familiar.

“Adriano _Tui_,” I felt like answering!

The ladies entered the room: Pepita, the governess, Silvia Caporale, and—Adriana.

“What, you here too?” asked Papiano, with ill-concealed irritation.

A second slip in his calculations! I could see from the way Papiano had welcomed Bernaldez that the old Marquis could have known nothing of the painter’s presence at this meeting, and that some little intrigue with Pepita was at the bottom of it. But the great Terenzio was not to be discouraged by so little: in forming the mystic circle about the table, he put Adri-ana next to himself and the Pantogada girl next to me.

Did I like that? Not at all! Nor Pepita either. In fact, she voiced her dissatisfaction instantly in a language exactly like her father ‘a:

“_Gracie_, Segnor Terencio! I prefer a place between Segnor Paleari and my governess!”

In the dim light shed by the red lantern, it was barely possible to distinguish outlines in the room; so I could not be sure exactly how far the portrait which Papiano had sketched of Pepita Pantogada corresponded to the truth. Certainly her manner, the tone of her voice, her immediate rebellion against anything she didn’t like, harmonized perfectly with the impression I had formed of her from his description. Her disdainful refusal to take the place assigned her by the master of ceremonies was unquestionably

disrespectful toward me; but far from being displeased, I was actually overjoyed.

“Quite right,” exclaimed Papiano. “Very well, let’s have it this way: Signora Candida next to Mr. Meis; then you, signorina, between Signora Candida and my father-in-law; then the rest of us as we are. Will that do?”

No, it didn’t do at all: neither for me, nor for Silvia Caporale, nor for Adriana, nor, as was soon apparent, for Pepita herself; because she managed eventually to find the place she wanted in a new circle arranged by the inventive spirit of Max Oliz. For the moment I found myself next to a mere ghost of a woman who had a kind of steeple on her head—Was it a hat? Was it a wig? Was it the way she fixed her hair? If not, what was it? At any rate from underneath that towering pile, one long sigh came following on another, each ending in a stifled word of protest. No one had thought of introducing me to Signora Candida. Now we had to hold hands in keeping the mystic chain intact! Her sense of propriety was shocked, poor thing! That was the reason for the sighs and protests! How cold her fingers were!

My right hand was clutching the left of Silvia Caporale, who was sitting at what might he called the head of the table, with her back against the white sheet. Papiano held her other hand. Next to him came Adriana, and then the painter. Anselmo sat at the foot of the table opposite Miss Caporale.

Papiano was the first to speak:

“We ought to begin by explaining to Mr. Meis and Miss Pantogada the… what do you call it?”

“The tiptological code!” proffered old Paleari.

“I need to know it too!” said Signora Candida, not to be overlooked, and squirming on her chair.

“Of course, to Signora Candida also!”

“Well,” old Anselmo began, “it’s this way: two taps mean ‘yes.'”

“Taps?” asked Pepita nervously. “What taps?”

“Why, taps!” replied Anselmo. “Either knocks on the table, the chairs, and so forth, or touches on the person!”

“Oh, no-o-o-o-o!” shivered the Spanish girl, jumping up from her place at the table. “I don’t want any touches. Who’s going to touch me?”

“Why Max, the spirit, signorina!” said Papiano. “I told you, on the way over! They won’t hurt you! Don’t be afraid.”

“Only _tictological_ touches!” added the governess, with a superior air.

“As I was saying,” Anselmo resumed: “two taps.: ‘yes’; three taps: ‘no’; four: ‘dark’; five: ‘speak’; six: ‘light’…. That will be enough for the present. So now let us concentrate, ladies and gentlemen.”

The room fell silent. We concentrated.

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