

The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 14 – Max turns a tricks

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In Italiano – [Il fu Mattia Pascal](#)

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The Late Mattia Pascal Chapter 14 Max turns a tricks

Uneasiness? No, nothing of the kind; but a keen curiosity, and a curious dread lest Papiano should be on the verge of a humiliating failure! I might have gloated over such a prospect; but I didn't. Who can escape a chill of mortification on witnessing a comedy badly played by actors who do not know their parts?

"One thing or the other," I speculated: "Either he is deeper than I thought, or he is walking blindly into his own trap. In his anxiety to keep Adriana for himself, he has made the mistake of leaving Bernaldez and Pepita, Adriana and me,

dissatisfied and therefore in a position to catch him at his game without any motive for calling it amusing or worth our time. Most likely Adriana will be the one to find him out; she is nearest to him, and is suspicious already. She will be on her guard. She came here only to be with me. I imagine she is already asking herself why she consents to aid and abet a farce which is not only stupid in itself but irreverent to religion and discreditable to all who take part in it. Bernaldez and Pepita must be feeling the same way about it. How is it a man as shrewd as Papiano can't understand that—once he failed to bring me and the Pantogada girl together. Is he so sure of himself as all that? How is he going to save his face?"

Busied with all these reflections, I had quite forgotten Silvia Caporale, who now suddenly began to speak as though she were in the first stages of her trance.

"The chain..." said she. "the chain... it must be altered!"

"Have we got Max already?" asked dear old Anselmo concernedly.

The woman allowed some time to elapse:

"Yes," she finally answered, in a dreamy, hollow voice. "He says there are too many of us here, this evening..."

"That's true," exclaimed Papiano, "but still I think we ought to be able to manage..."

"Hush!" whispered Paleari. "Let's hear what Max says!"

"The chain!" Miss Caporale resumed. "The chain...! He finds it out of balance. Here, on this side" (and she raised my hand in hers) "there are two women next to each other. He says that Mr. Paleari should take the place of Miss Pantogada and vice versa...!"

"Easy to fix," cried Anselmo, rising from his chair. "Here, signorina, won't you have my chair?"

This time Pepita did not protest: she could now hold hands with her painter.

“Next,” added the ‘medium,’ “Signora Candida might...”

Papiano interrupted:

“I have it—in Adriana’s place, eh? The same thing had occurred to me! Let’s try it that way!”

The moment I found Adriana’s hand in mine, I squeezed it till it hurt. On the other side I felt a significant pressure from Miss Caporale’s fingers, as though asking me:

“Is that better?”

I returned her clasp with enthusiasm, shaking her hand to signify more or less clearly:

“Anything you wish, now!”

“Silence!” suggested Anselmo in a solemn voice.

And who had spoken? One, two, three, four! The table! Four taps!

“Darkness!”

I was sure I had heard nothing!

But, the moment the lantern was extinguished, something happened which suddenly upset all my calculations. Miss Caporale uttered a shrill blood-curdling scream which brought us all up, standing in our places.

“Light! Light!”

What had taken place? As Bernaldez scratched a match, we could see that Miss Caporale’s nose and mouth were bleeding. She had received a tremendous blow in the face!

Pepita and Signora Candida shrank back from the table. Papiano

too got up to light the red lantern again. Adriana loosened her hand from mine. Bernaldez stood at his chair, the burnt match in his fingers, smiling in astonishment and incredulity. Old Anselmo was muttering in utter consternation:

“So he struck her? As hard as that? What can it mean? What can it mean?”

In one way I was as puzzled as he. Why had he given her that blow? So that change in the mystic circle had not been prearranged between them? The piano teacher had rebelled against Papiano—with these results? Well, what next?

Miss Caporale had pushed her chair back from the table, and stood there pressing her handkerchief to her bleeding lips. She was refusing to go on with the seance. And Pepita Pantogada was chattering in her quaint Italo-Spanish:

“_Gracie, signori, gracie! Acqui se dano cachetas_! Thanks, thanks, this is too rough for me!”

“But no, please!” exclaimed Paleari. “Why, ladies and gentlemen, this is the most amazing occurrence in the history of spiritualism! We must get to the bottom of it. We must ask him to explain!”

“Ask Max?” I queried.

“Max, of course!” said he. “Why Silvia, do you suppose you misunderstood him in rearranging the chain?”

“I am sure she did, I’m sure she did!” said Bernaldez, laughing.

“What do you think, Mr. Meis?” asked Paleari of me, not liking Bernaldez’s attitude at all.

“Why, I should think that was a good guess,” I evaded.

But Silvia Caporale kept shaking her head with decision.

“So you say no,” Paleari resumed. “Well, how do you account for it? Max losing his head! It’s beyond me! What do you say, Terenzio?”

Terenzio, secure there in the faint light from the red lantern, was not saying anything. He just shrugged his shoulders.

“Please, Miss Caporale.” I now ventured. “Suppose we do as Mr. Paleari suggests. Let’s ask Max all about it; and then if he proves too frisky to work with tonight, we’ll call it all off. You agree, Mr. Papiano?”

“Certainly,” he answered. “Ask him anything you want! I’m willing!”

“But I’m not—in this condition!” said the Caporale woman sharply, turning frankly upon him.

“Why put it up to me?” said Papiano. “If you want to stop...”

“Yes, let’s!” ventured Adriana.

But old Anselmo raised his voice in ridicule:

“‘Yes, let’s! Did you ever see such a stupid! Say, I’m ashamed of you, Adriana! Well... now, Silvia, look, I leave it to you... You have been communicating with Max all these years, and you know very well that this is the first time he ever... Oh, I say, it would be a shame to spoil it... too bad he hurt you so, but the phenomena were beginning to develop this evening with unusual energy...”

“Even too much energy!” tittered Bernaldez with a laugh that proved contagious.

“But please,” I added in the same spirit, “if there are to be any more punches I hope they’ll miss this eye of mine!...”

“_E mio también_!” chirped Miss Pepita.

"Back to the table then," ordered Papiano resolutely. "Let's follow Mr. Meis's suggestion, and ask an explanation. If things get too exciting, we'll stop. To your seats, ladies!"

And he blew out the lantern.

This time I found Adriana's hand cold and trembling. Respectful of her state of mind, I did not clutch her fingers with the same gay fervor, but pressed them gently and firmly to express a mood of earnest tranquillity. It was probable that Papiano had repented of his burst of temper and would change his tack; in any event we could rely upon a breathing space before Max became interested in Adriana or me. "If he tries anything of the kind on this girl," I said to myself, "it will be all over before he knows it!"

Anselmo was by this time in conversation with Max whom he addressed as naturally as though he were talking to a living person present in the room:

"Are you with us, Max?"

Two barely audible taps on the table: he was.

"And how is this, Max?" the old man asked in a tone of mild reproach. "You've always been so kind and courteous hitherto! Why were you so rough with poor Miss Caporale? Are you willing to tell us?"

The table moved this way and that, for a second or more; then—three solid raps in the middle of it! No! Max would not discuss the question!

"Well, we won't insist!" Anselmo continued. "I suppose you're put out over something, eh? Yes! I can see you're not in a happy frame of mind. I know you, Max, understand! I know you! But perhaps you'll be willing to say whether you like the chain arranged as it is?"

Paleari had hardly finished the question when I felt two light

quick touches, as though from the tip of a finger, in the center of my forehead.

“Yes!” I called, declaring the “manifestation,” and squeezing Adriana’s hand.

I must confess that this “tiptological” touch gave me, at the moment, an uncanny shiver. I was sure that had I been able to raise my hand at once I would have caught Papiano’s; but at the same time, I had not been expecting such a thing, and the lightness and precision of the taps amazed me. But meantime, why had Papiano picked me out for this revelation of his tolerance! Was he trying to make me feel easier in my mind, or was it rather a provocation and a challenge:—“I’ll show you whether I like it!”?

“That’s nice of you, Max!” Anselmo encouraged; and I, annotating mentally: “Yes, mighty nice of you... but if you go one step too far...!”

“Now,” the old man began again, “you would make us all happy if you would give some sign of your good will toward us!”

Five taps on the table: talk!

“What does that mean?” asked Signora Candida nervously.

“It means we must talk!” Papiano exclaimed quietly.

And Pepita:

“Talk? To whom I talk?”

“To anybody—the person next to you, for example!”

“Loud?”

“Out loud!” volunteered Anselmo. “This means, Mr. Meis, that Max is working up something interesting for us. Perhaps he will show a light or something. So talk, talk!”

As for talking, I had, through my finger tips, been carrying on a long, tender and yet impulsive conversation with Adriana and now, frankly, there was not a thought in my brain. A thrilling intoxication had come over me as I twined her fingers around mine, noting with mad delight the anxiety she betrayed to express her own feelings with a reserve in keeping with the timid gentle candor of her innocence. But now, while our hands were continuing this intense communion, I suddenly became aware of something that was rubbing against the rung between the rear legs of my chair.

A creepy sensation ran over me. Papiano could not possibly reach that far with his toes, let alone the obstacles the front of the chair would have given him. Had he risen from the table and gone around behind me? But in such a case, Signora Candida, unless she were a complete fool, would have announced the breaking of the chain. Before giving warning of the "manifestation" I wanted to understand it myself; but then I thought that since I had consented to the seance only to be near Adriana, it was only fair play to follow the rules. Without delay, and to avoid irritating Papiano unnecessarily, I declared what I was hearing.

"Really!" exclaimed Papiano from his place, in an astonishment which I thought was sincere.

And Miss Caporale evinced just as much surprise.

"A rubbing?" asked old Anselmo, with the deepest concern. "What is it like? What is it like?"

"Yes, a rubbing!" I answered almost angrily. "And it's still there! It's as though... an animal... a dog... were scratching himself against my chair."

A loud burst of laughter greeted this guess of mine.

"Why, it's Minerva, it's Minerva!" cried Pepita Panto gada.

"And who is Minerva?" I asked in some mortification.

"Why, my naughty, naughty little doggie!" she continued, almost in convulsions. "_La viechia mia, Signore, die se grata asi soto tute le sedie_! She scratches that way every time she gets near a chair! _Con permisso! Con permisso_!"

The chain was broken. Bernaldez lighted a match, while Pepita came and fished Minerva out from under my chair to cuddle her in her arms.

"Now I understand why Max was so out of humor this evening," old Anselmo commented with some heat. "There has been a bit too much frivolity, if I may say so!"

* * *

Nor, except possibly for Anselmo, was there much less on succeeding evenings, so far as spiritualism was concerned, that is.

There is no telling all the tricks that Max performed there in the dark. The table writhed, twisted, creaked, tapping and tapping, now lightly, now noisily. There were taps on the seats of our chairs, on the furniture here and there about the room. You could hear the rasping of finger nails on wood, and the swish of garments in the air. Strange phosphorescent lights would flash and go wandering off through the air, like will 'o the wisps astray. The curtain would bulge and swell, brightening at times with a weird supernatural glow. A small smoking-stand went cavorting around the room, finally leaping over our heads and coming to rest on the table in front of us. The guitar seemed to have grown wings; for it took flight from the chest on which it lay and hung in the air above us, all its strings vibrating. But I thought that Max showed his musical talents best with the bells on the dog collar, which at one point jumped and buckled itself around Miss Caporale's neck. Old Anselmo interpreted that as a very witty demonstration of affection on Max's part; though the lady

herself did not seem to relish the joke at all.

Evidently Scipione, Papiano's brother, had come on the scene under cover of the dark and was doing all these things on detailed instructions from Terenzio. The young fellow was really an epileptic; but he was not so much of a dunce as his brother and even himself wanted people to think. I suppose by long practice at the same tricks he felt quite at home in the dark. To tell the truth, I never went to the trouble to find out exactly how well he executed the hoaxes he rehearsed beforehand with Papiano and the Caporale woman. For the four of us—Bernaldez and Pepita, Adriana and I—were satisfied so long as he kept Anselmo and the governess interested; and that he seemed to be doing marvelously, though neither of them, really, was very hard to please. Old Anselmo just bubbled over with joy, chortling and gurgling like some child at a puppet show. His comments, indeed, sometimes gave me a most uncomfortable feeling of mortification, not only because it was painful to see a man, of his intelligence after all, evince such extremes of gullibility, but because Adriana made me understand more than once that it hurt her conscience to be owing her own joy to her father's making a fool of himself.

This scruple came to our minds occasionally to interrupt our blissfulness; and it was the only thing to disturb us. Nevertheless, knowing Papiano as I did, I should have been on my mettle: I should have suspected that if he consented to leave Adriana to me, and, contrary to my guess, never allowed Max to interfere with us but rather made the "spirit" play our game, he must be having some other scheme in mind. I was so completely carried away, however, by the delights of my love-making in the security of that darkened room, that I am sure the idea that anything might be wrong never once occurred to me.

"No!" screamed Pepita at a certain point. And Anselmo:

"Speak up, signorina! What was it? What did you feel?"

Bernaldez also urged the girl to speak.

"Why," she said, "a touch, here, on my cheek!"

"Fingers?" asked Paleari. "A light one, I'll warrant—cold, furtive, but light, very light! Oh, I can tell you, Max has a fine way with women! What do you say, Max? Won't you just pat the lady again?"

"O-oo-oo-oo," screamed Pepita, but laughing this time. "Aquí està! Aquí està!"

"What do you mean?" asked Anselmo, not understanding the Spanish words.

"He's doing it again... he's tickling me!"

"And now a kiss, eh, Max?" proposed Paleari.

"No, no, no!" screamed Pepita.

But a loud sonorous smack echoed from her cheek.

Almost involuntarily, I raised Adriana's hand to my lips; and that caress quite maddened me. I bent over and sought her lips.

Thus it was that the first kiss, a long, a silent, an impassioned kiss was exchanged between us.

And now, immediately—what was it that took place? For some moments, in a bewilderment of shame and confusion, I was too much flurried to grasp the cause of the sudden disorder. Had I been detected spooning?

Every one was shouting and screaming. One match was struck, and then a second! A candle was lighted—the candle inside the red lantern.

All the people present had jumped to their feet. Why? Why?

And now, there, in the lighted room, in plain view of us all, a blow, a heavy blow, as from the fist of an invisible giant, landed squarely in the middle of the table!

We all paled with fright, Papiano and the Caporale woman more terrified than anyone else.

“Scipione! Scipione!” called Terenzio.

There the boy was! He had fallen to the floor in one of his attacks, and was gasping strangely for breath.

“Keep your seats!” cried Anselmo. “He’s in the trance, too! Oh, look, look! The table! The table! It’s moving! A levitation! A real levitation! Good for you, Max! Good for you!”

And the table, in fact, without anyone’s touching it, rose four inches or more and fell back, with a thud, heavily, to the floor.

Silvia Caporale, pale as death, trembling, terror-stricken, shrank against me, hiding her face in my coat. Pepita and the governess ran shrieking from the room. Paleari was beside himself:

“Sit down, sit down! For heaven’s sake, people! Don’t break the chain! We’re coming to the best of it. Max! Max!”

“Max, nonsense!” exclaimed Papiano, recovering finally from the consternation that had frozen him in his tracks to the floor, running over to his brother to bring him to.

All thought of the kiss I had stolen had been momentarily driven from my mind by the strange and unexplainable manifestation that I had witnessed. If, as Paleari contended, the mysterious power, that had worked there in that lighted room under my very eyes, came from an invisible spirit, that spirit was surely not Max: the expression of the faces of Papiano and Silvia Caporale were good proof of that. Max was a

hoax of their invention. Who had acted then? Who had struck that terrific blow on the table?

All the things that I had read in old Paleari's books now came crowding in a tumult into my mind. With a shiver I thought of the poor unknown man who had drowned himself back there in the Miragno Flume, a man whom I had robbed of the tears of his people and of the sorrow of the strangers who found him.

"It might be he," I said to myself. "Supposing he had come here to seek me out, and get his revenge by revealing everything!..."

Paleari, meantime, the only one of us neither surprised nor alarmed by what had occurred, stood there unable to understand how such a commonplace phenomenon as the levitation of a table had been able to affect us so deeply after all the other marvels we had seen. The mere fact that the room was lighted made little difference to him. What puzzled him rather was the presence in the room of the boy, Scipione, who he had supposed was in bed.

"I am surprised because ordinarily he takes no interest in our researches. I imagine our secret gatherings roused his curiosity, so he crept in to see what we were doing, and then—slam bang! Because it is well established, Mr. Meis, that the more unusual manifestations of mediumism derive from epileptic, cataleptic and hysterical neurosis. Max gets the energy he uses from all of us—and it takes quite a little to produce the phenomena we have seen. There is no doubt on this point. Don't you feel as though you had lost something?"

"Not as yet, to tell the truth!" I answered.

Till dawn almost, I tossed uneasily on my bed, thinking of the unfortunate man who lay buried in the Miragno cemetery under my name. Who was he? Where had he come from? Why had he killed himself? Perhaps he had hoped his unhappy end would become known—as an expiation, a restitution, in a sense! And I

had profited by it all!

More than once, I confess, as I lay there in the dark, a chill of cold terror ran up and down my body. It had all taken place right there, in my room—the seance, that blow on the table, the levitation. Others had seen as I had! Was he responsible? Might he not be standing there, invisible, at my bedside? I would hold my breath and listen to catch any sound in the room. Finally I fell into an uneasy slumber made horrible by frightful dreams.

When morning came, I drew my curtains and opened my windows wide to the full sunlight.

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