

# The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 15 – I and my shadow

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

En Español – [El difunto Matias Pascal](#)



## The Late Mattia Pascal Chapter 15 I and my shadow

Many a time, on awaking in the heart of the night (can such a cruel thing as night have a heart?) I have experienced, in the darkness and in the silence, a curious surprise, a strange perplexity, on suddenly thinking of something I have done during the daytime without noticing; and on such occasions I have wondered whether the shapes, the colors, the sounds of things that surround us in the varied whirl of life may not somehow determine our actions.

I am sure they do. Are we not, as old Anselmo says, in relation with the universe? It would be interesting to know how many idiotic things this blessed universe impels us to do,

for which we hold our much overworked consciences responsible; while these, poor things, are really the victims of exterior forces, blinded by a light that is not of themselves. And on the other hand, how many schemes we form during the night time, how many decisions we make, how many projects we conceive, only to have their vanity and foolishness become apparent with the return of day! Day is one thing and night is another! So we perhaps may be one thing by day and another by night—though little enough we amount to in either case, I am afraid!

I know that on letting the light into my room after forty days of confinement, I did not feel the least joy. The memory of what I had been doing during all those days took the radiance out of the sunshine. All the reasons, arguments, excuses, which had had their weight and convincingness in the dark either lost these when the curtains were drawn aside and the windows opened, or seemed to acquire wholly different values. Vainly the poor I, which had been shut in so long behind darkened shutters and had striven in every way to alleviate the tedium of its imprisonment, trailed along after the other I that had let in the bright sun and, severe, frowning, aggressive, was turning its face to the new day. Vainly did it seek to banish all irksome thoughts, noting, for example, in front of the mirror, the success of my operation, the attractiveness of the long beard that had come out again, and a certain fineness, a certain delicacy in the pallor that had settled on my features.

“You ass! What have you done! What have you done!”

What had I done? Nothing, really, when you come down to it! I had made love to a girl.

In the dark—was I responsible for the dark?—I had not been aware of difficulties, and had lost the reserve which I had so rigidly prescribed for myself. Papiano had tried to keep Adriana away from me. Silvia Caporale had given her back,

assigning her to a seat at my side (poor Silvia getting a punch in the face for her kindness)! I was a sick man, in pain; and naturally, I thought—as any other wretch (say man, if you want to) would have thought under the circumstances—that I had a right to some compensation; and so, since the said compensation was sitting in a chair at my elbow, I had accepted it. While old Anselmo was messing around with ghosts and dead people, I had preferred the life at my side—a life ready to bloom forth into joy under a kiss of love. Well, Manuel Bernaldez had kissed his Pepita in the dark, so I accordingly.. ooph!... I sank into an armchair, my face in my hands. I could feel my lips quiver at the memory of that kiss. Adriana! Adriana! What hopes might I have aroused in her heart by it? Engaged, eh? And now, with the curtains drawn and the windows opened—mish-mash and good appetite! A pleasant time for all!

I sat there in the chair I don't know how long, thinking, thinking, with my eyes wide open into space, drawing myself up now and then in an angry shudder as though to free myself from the torture within me. At last I could see in all its rawness the humbug in my illusion, the cheat that underlay what, in the first intoxication of my freedom, I had called the greatest of good fortunes.

In the beginning this freedom had seemed to me boundless, without restriction; then I had discovered that it had a limit—in the modest funds at my disposal. Next I had perceived that, liberty though it be, it was a liberty which exacted a fearful price, condemning me to solitude and lonesomeness, precluding all companionship. So I had approached people to escape from that, determined, nevertheless, to avoid any relationships, even the slightest, that might fetter me. Well, what had that determination amounted to? Life—life that was no longer for me—had respliced the bonds I had broken with it; life, in all its irresistible insurgence had, despite my wariness and caution, sucked me

back into its vortex! I could not close my eyes to that fact now. I could no longer refuse, on one fatuous pretext or another, with one pitiable excuse or another, to recognize my feelings for Adriana, nor attenuate the consequence of my intentions, my words, my acts: I had said too much without saying anything—just by pressing her hand in mine, by twining her fingers around my fingers; and a kiss, a kiss at last, had consecrated our love beyond recall. How make my promise good? Could I marry Adriana? But those two women back home, Romilda and the widow Pescatore, had thrown me—not themselves—into the mill-flume at “The Coops.” Romilda was free enough—yes! But I wasn’t. I had set out to play the part of a dead man, thinking I might live another life, become an entirely different person. And I could be indeed another man—but on what condition? On condition that I refrain from doing anything, that I keep clear of activity of any kind! A fine sort of man, that! The shadow of a man! That’s it—a ghost in flesh and blood! And what a life! So long as I had been content to keep shut up within myself and be a mere spectator of the life others were living, so long was it possible to maintain, after a fashion, the illusion that I was really living another life. But let me venture forth even so little as to snatch a kiss from two pretty lips...!

I was repelled, in horror, as though I had kissed Adriana with the lips of a corpse, a corpse who could never come to life again for her.

Oh, if Adriana... oh no! no!... if Adriana were to understand my strange predicament... Adriana? Impossible! Not that pure, innocent child!... And supposing... supposing love were strong enough in her—stronger than any social or moral scruple... Oh, poor Adriana! Could I take her with me into the empty world to which my lot confined me, make her the wife of a man who could never dare declare and prove himself alive? What then? What could I do?

Two knocks on my door brought me from my chair with a bound.

It was she, Adriana.

Though I tried with a supreme effort to master my emotions, I could not suppress on my face all traces of the tumult within me. She too was somewhat constrained, from a natural reserve of modesty which did not allow her to show all the pleasure she felt at seeing me quite well again, with light in my room once more, and—happy... Yet, no, not happy? Why not? She looked up at me furtively. Then she blushed. Finally she handed me a sealed envelope.

“Here is something—for you!”

“A letter?”

“I don’t think so. It’s probably Doctor Ambrosini’s bill. The messenger is waiting to see if there’s an answer.”

Her voice trembled. She smiled.

“Right away!” I answered; but a wave of tenderness swept over me as I divined that she had seized the pretext of the note to come herself and hear from me one word that would encourage the leaping hope she had conceived. A deep anguished pity gripped me—pity for her, pity for myself, a cruel pity that impelled me irresistibly to caress her, to find some little balm for my own agony which could seek comfort only in her who was the cause of it. Knowing very well that I would be still further compromised, I was unable to restrain myself. I held out both my hands. Trustful, humble, her face aglow, she slowly raised her own and placed them in mine. I drew her little blond head to my breast and gently stroked her hair.

“Poor Adriana!” I said.

“Why?” she asked, under my caress. “Are we not happy?”

“Yes!”

“Why ‘poor Adriana’ then?”

At that moment I almost lost control of myself. I was tempted to rebel, to reveal everything, to answer: “Why? Listen, little girl: I love you, and I cannot, I must not, love you. But if you are willing...”

“If you are willing!” What could that tiny defenceless creature decide for herself in such a matter? I pressed her little head hard against me, realizing what unspeakable cruelty it would be to hurl her from the supreme joy in which, unsuspecting, she felt herself at that moment of exaltation, into the abyss of desperation where I was writhing in torment.

“Because,” I actually said, releasing her, “because I know of many things that might make you unhappy ..!”

A sharp pain was visible on her face as she looked up. I had abruptly ended my tender caress—and I had avoided the intimate word for “you.” Surely she had not been expecting such aloofness. She gazed at me for a moment. Then, noting my distress, she asked fearfully:

“You know things?... About yourself... or about us... the house here?”

I replied with a gesture that meant “Here! Here!”; but it was really to escape the violent impulse that was driving me to full confession.

Had I but yielded then! One great shock would have come to her; but many others would have been spared her; and I should have saved myself from new and more harassing complications. But my sad discovery was still too recent for me to have grasped its full significance. Love and pity outweighed stern resolution in me. I had not the heart to destroy at one blow her hopes and my own life—at least that illusion of living, which, so long as I kept silent, I could still preserve. How odious, how hateful to me the revelation I would have to make:

a wife already! Yes, there was no evading it: the moment I should admit I was not Adriano Meis, I would become Mattia Pascal again perforce—Mattia Pascal, dead and buried, but married still! How could I put such a thing into words? Was this not the extreme of persecution that a wife may inflict upon a husband: to get rid of him by the false identification of a corpse, but then to cling to him, to be a perpetual weight upon him in this way, after his death? I could have refused to accept the situation, it is true! I could have gone home and declared myself alive! But who would not have done as I did, in my place? Any man in the fix I was in at that time would have seized such an unexpected, such an un hoped for, such an incredible opportunity to cast off at once a wife, a mother-in-law, a ruinous debt, a sickly, miserable, meaningless existence! Could I have realized at that time that, officially pronounced dead, I would not be free from my wife—that she could marry again, while I could not—that the life which opened ahead of me, free, free, limitlessly, boundlessly free, was only a dream which could never attain more than a superficial realization, was only a vile humiliating slavery to the lies I would be forced to tell, to the pretences I would be forced to make, to the fear of detection that would relentlessly pursue me, though I had done no wrong?

Adriana recognized that there was little in her home surroundings to make her happy; but now... A mournful smile gathered about her lips and eyes as she stood there looking up at me... Could things that were a source of sorrow to her really be obstacles between her and me?

“Surely not?” that mournful smile and that appealing gaze seemed to say.

“But we must give Doctor Ambrosini his money!” I exclaimed gaily, pretending suddenly to remember that the messenger was waiting in the other room.

I tore open the envelope, and remarked in a light laughing tone:

“Six hundred lire! What do you think of that, Adriana? Signora Nature is playing me one of her usual tricks. Notice now: for years and years I had to go around with a—what shall we say—an unruly, a disobedient eye in my face. Now I have a doctor cut me up and I spend forty days in a dark cell—just because Madame Nature made a mistake, you see. Well, after it’s all over, I have to foot the bill! Do you call that square?”

Adriana smiled, with an effort:

“Perhaps Doctor Ambrosini would make a fuss, though, if you told him to send his bill to Mrs. Nature. I’ll bet he wants a word of thanks and appreciation into the bargain; because your eye...”

“Do you think it’s an improvement?”

She tried to look up into my face, but soon turned away, replying faintly:

“Yes, much better!”

“I or the eye?”

“You!”

“I was afraid these whiskers...”

“No, why? They are very becoming!”

I could have dug that eye out with my fingers! Lots of good it did me to have it in place again!

“And yet,” I said, “perhaps the eye itself was better satisfied to remain as it used to be. It complains a little every now and then! However... I’ll get over it!”

I stepped toward the cabinet where I kept my money. Adriana



turned to go away but I detained her—stupidly; and yet, how could I have foreseen? In all the crises big and little in my life, Fortune, as my story shows, had always stood by me. Well, she did, in this case too—with a vengeance!

As I started to open the cabinet I noticed that the key would not turn in the lock. I pulled gently and the doors swung out: it was open!

“What in the world!” I exclaimed. “Could I have left it this way?”

Noting my sudden commotion, Adriana turned deathly pale. I looked at her.

“Why, signorina,” I said, “someone must have been prying into this!”

Things inside the case were topsy-turvy: my banknotes had been extracted from the leather purse in which I carried them and lay strewn about on the bottom of the cabinet.

Adriana buried her face in her hands, aghast.

Feverishly I gathered up the scattered bills and began to count them:

“Is it possible?” I murmured, on finishing the count, passing my trembling hands over my forehead to wipe the cold sweat away.

Adriana clutched at the edge of my table to keep from falling in a faint. Then she asked in a hollow voice that was not her own:

“Have they robbed you?”

“Why—how can this be! Wait... wait!”

I began to count the bills over again, digging my nails furiously into the paper as though violence could bring to

light the bank notes that were missing.

"How much?" asked Adriana in a tone that betrayed an inner convulsion of horror and dismay.

"Twelve... twelve thousand..." I faltered. "There were sixty-five... there are now fifty-three. ... You count them!"

Had I not rushed to catch her, Adriana would have collapsed as under a hammer-blow. However, with a great effort upon herself, she straightened up and, sobbing, choking, tore herself from my arms as I tried to let her down into a chair.

"I shall call papa," she said, pushing toward the door. "I shall call papa!"

"No!" I almost shouted, forcing her back into the chair. "No! Please don't get excited, signorina! You make it harder for me, this way! I won't let you! I won't let you! What have you to do with it? Please, stop crying now! I must look around, make sure; because ... yes, the cabinet was open; but I cannot, I must not, believe that such a large sum of money has been stolen.... Now be good, little girl! Promise?"

Once more, as a last precaution, I counted the money over.... Then, though I was absolutely certain that I had placed it all there in the cabinet, I searched my room from floor to ceiling, looking even in places where I should never have hidden such a sum except in a moment of dire insanity. To justify the absurd hunt to my own mind, I kept trying to emphasize the incredible audacity of the thief; until Adriana, hysterical now, weeping and sobbing, her hands to her face, groaned:

"Oh don't, don't! A thief! A thief! Even a thief: And it was all planned in advance! I heard it... in the dark... I suspected something... but I refused to believe he would go that far..."

Papiano! Yes, Papiano! It could be no one but he ... using his

half-witted brother... during the "experiments" in the darkened room!

"But I don't understand..." Adriana wept again. ... "I don't understand! How could you ever keep so much money with you—in a cabinet like that—at home?"

I turned toward her and stood silent as in a stupor. How answer that question? Could I tell her that I was obliged, in my circumstances, to keep my money with me, that I did not dare deposit it in any bank or entrust it to any broker—since, in case I should have the least difficulty in withdrawing it, I could never establish my legal identity and ownership?

Not to arouse her suspicions by my embarrassment, I was simply cruel:

"How could I ever have supposed...?"

The poor girl was now in a paroxysm of anguish:

"O God! O God! O God!" she wept.

The terror that might properly have assailed the person guilty of the theft now came over me instead, as I thought of possible consequences. Papiano would guess that I could not charge the Spanish painter with the crime, nor old Anselmo, nor Pepita Pantogada, nor Silvia Caporale, nor the spirit of Max Oliz. He would know mighty well that I would accuse him—him and his brother. Well, knowing that, he had gone ahead just the same, defying me.

What could I do, indeed? Have him arrested? How-could I do that? Never, in the world! I could do nothing, nothing, nothing!

The reflection crushed me utterly.

A second discovery, and all in one day! I knew who the thief was, and I could not have him punished. What right had I to

the law's protection? I was outside every law. Who was I, please? Nobody! I did not exist, in the eyes of the law! Anybody could pick my pocket and I... hush, hush!

But—come to think of it—how could Papiano be sure of just that?

He couldn't!

Well then?

"How did he manage it?" I said, almost to myself. "Where did he ever get the courage?"

Adriana raised her head from her hands, and looked at me in astonishment, as much as to say: "Don't you understand?"

"Yes, I see!" I answered, catching what she meant.

"But you will have him arrested," she exclaimed resolutely, rising to her feet. "I am going to call papa! He will have him arrested!"

Again I was in time to stop her. That would have been the last straw—Adriana, of all people, compelling me to have recourse to the law! I had lost twelve thousand lire—but that was nothing! I had also to fear lest the crime become known. I had also to get down on my knees and beg Adriana not to talk, not, for Heaven's sake, to let anybody know!

But—nonsense! Adriana (I see it all clearly enough now) could not possibly allow me to be silent and force silence also upon her. She could not accept what must have looked like a generous act on my part, could not for a number of reasons: first, on account of her love for me; then for the good reputation of her house; finally, out of fear and hatred for her brother-in-law.

But at that painful moment, her well-justified rebellion seemed to me just one nuisance too much: angrily, I menaced:

“But you will keep this to yourself, do you hear? You won’t say a word to a living soul, do you hear? Do you want to cause a scandal?”

The poor child began to sob again:

“No, no! I don’t want to make a scandal! But I’m going to rid my home of that disgraceful rascal!”

“But he’ll say he didn’t do it!” I persisted. “And then you, and all the rest of us, as suspects, in court! Can’t you see that?”

“Well, what of it?” answered Adriana, quivering now with anger. “Let him deny it, let him deny it! But we, you know, have plenty of other things to say against him. Have him arrested, Mr. Meis! Don’t be afraid for us! You will be doing us a great service, believe me! You will be paying him back for what he did to my poor sister... You ought to see that you will be doing me a wrong not to report him to the police. If you don’t, I will, so there! How can you expect papa and me to live under such a disgrace? No! I won’t! I won’t! I won’t!... Besides...”

I caught the little girl up in my arms, forgetting all about the money for the moment in my anguish at seeing her suffer so desperately. I promised her that I would do as she said, if only she would dry her tears. How did it reflect on her and her papa? I knew who was to blame: Papiano had decided my love for her was worth twelve thousand lire. Well, should I show him he was wrong by having him arrested?

“You want him arrested? Well, I’ll report him, there, there, little girl! Not on account of the money—but just to get him out of the house... yes, yes... right away... but on one condition, little girl... that you wipe away those tears... and stop crying that way, eh?... Yes, yes... But you must promise ... promise by all you hold most dear... that you’ll not mention the theft to a living soul... till I’ve had time to consult a lawyer... there!

there!... and see what all the consequences might be... because now... we're too excited... we might make some mistake... You promise? You promise? By all you hold most dear?"

Adriana took the oath, and with a look, through her tears, that told me what she was swearing by, what it was she held most dear in all the world. Poor, poor Adriana!

When she went out, I stood there in the middle of the room, stunned, vacant, confounded, as though all the world had vanished from around me. How long was it before I came to myself again? And how did I revive? Plain idiocy! Plain idiocy! Only an imbecile could stand there looking at the cabinet, as I was doing. Had the lock been jimmied? No, there was not a trace of violence on the varnish. The door had been opened with a duplicate, while I was keeping my key so carefully in my pocket.

"Don't you feel as though you had lost something?" Paleari had asked me at the end of the last seance. Twelve thousand lire!

Again the thought of my absolute helplessness, of my absolute nothingness, came over me, flattening me to earth. That I might be robbed, that I could say nothing in such a case, that, indeed, I should have to fear the crime might be discovered quite as much as though I myself were the thief, had not occurred even remotely to my mind.

"Twelve thousand lire! But that's nothing: they could take every cent I have, strip the shirt off my back, and still I... hush! hush! What right have I to speak? Question: 'Who are you?' Question: 'Where did you get that money?' Well, never mind the police... This evening, say, I go up to him and I seize him by the collar: 'Here, you miserable scoundrel, just hand back that money you took out of my cabinet!'... He raises his voice in holy wrath. He denies. Can you imagine him saying: 'Why yes, here you are, old man! I took it by mistake!'? And that isn't the worst of it. He might even sue

me for slander! No... hush—the soft pedal! Hah! And I thought I was so lucky when they declared me dead! Well, now I'm really dead! Dead? I'm worse than dead: as old Anselmo reminded me—the dead are through with dying, while I have to die again. Alive as regards the dead, dead as regards the living! What kind of a life can I live, after all? Again alone, all by myself—solitude!”

With a shudder of horror, I buried my face in my hands and sank into a chair.

Ah, were I but a criminal outright! I could reconcile myself to a life like that, getting used to wandering and continual danger, living indeed in constant suspense, without fixed purposes, without definite connections. But I? I could do nothing! But something I had to do! Well, what? Go away, for instance! Yes, but where? And Adriana! What could I do for her? Nothing! Nothing! Yet, how, after what had happened, could I just go away without any explanation? She would attribute my conduct to the theft; but then she would ask: “Why did he choose to protect the thief and punish me?” Oh no, no! Poor Adriana! But since I could not act, how could I hope to save appearances with her? I had to seem illogical and cruel—there was no escape from that! Cruelty, inconsistency, for that matter, were part and parcel of my situation in the world; and I was the first to suffer from them. Even Papiano, the thief, was more coherent and less brutal in committing the theft, than I would have to show myself in forgiving him.

What better logic, in fact? He wanted Adriana, to avoid repaying the dowry of his first wife. I had tried to deprive him of Adriana. Was it not fair, therefore, that I should pay the money to Anselmo?

As logical as Euclid, barring the detail of thievery—a mere detail.

Hardly thievery at all, when you look at it right. For my loss

would be more apparent than real. Adriana being the girl she was, Papiano understood that I would make her my wife and not my lover. Well, in that case, I would get my money back in the dowry. My money back, and the dearest sweetest little woman in the world! What more could I ask for?

Oh, I was absolutely sure: if we could only wait, if Adriana could manage to hold her tongue, we would see Papiano paying the money he owed to Anselmo even before the note fell due. Well, to be sure—I wouldn't get the money because I could never marry Adriana; but she would get it—provided that is, she would follow my advice and keep quiet; and provided I could stay on for some time in the house. A tough job—lots of skill, and the patience of Job! But in the end Adriana could look forward to the return of the dowry.

This conclusion quieted my apprehensions, at least in her regard. As regards myself, alas, I was still faced by all the horror of my discovery—the fallacy in my new life, in comparison with which the loss of twelve thousand lire was nothing—even a blessing, if it proved in the end to help Adriana a little.

For my part, I was cut off now from life forever; I had no conceivable chance of reentering it again. With that bitter sorrow in my heart, with all this terrifying experience of the reality before me, I would leave that house where I had begun to feel at home, where I had found a little rest and quiet. Yes, out upon the roads again, roads leading to nowhere, an aimless, purposeless, unending vagabondage! Fear of being caught again by the tentacles of life would keep me more than ever aloof from men. Alone! Alone! Utterly alone!

Morose, diffident, suspicious! The tortures of Tantalus!

I picked up my hat and coat and ran out of the house like mad.

When I came to my senses I found myself on the Via Flaminia near the Ponte Molle. Why had I come just there? I looked



around. The sun was shining brightly. My eyes chanced to fall upon my shadow, clean cut on the white pavement. I stood contemplating it for a time. Finally I raised my foot to stamp on it. But no, no! I could not. I could not stamp on my own shadow. Which was more of a shadow, I or my shadow itself?

Two shadows!

There, there, on the ground! And anybody could walk on it, grind his heels into my head, into my heart. And I could say nothing, or my shadow either!

“The shadow of a dead man—that’s what I am!”

A wagon was approaching. I stood just as I was to see if it were not so: yes, first the horse, one hoof after another; then the two wheels!

“Exactly! Let him have it! Right across the neck! Ah-hah! That’s good, you too, eh, doggie? That’s right—hut your leg a little higher, eh? Just a little higher, eh?”

And I burst into a bitter laugh. The dog scampered off, afraid of me. The teamster turned and looked, wondering what I was laughing at. But I started away, my shadow moving along the ground in front of me. With a mad ferocious delight, I amused myself pushing the shadow under the wheels of carriages, the hoofs of horses, the feet of passersby. At one moment I failed to find it where I had been expecting, and the queer idea came to me that I might have kicked it loose. But I turned around. It was there on the ground behind me, now.

“And if I start running, it will keep up with me to the end!” I mused.

Had I gone crazy? Had I fallen prey to a fixed idea? I pinched my forehead to be sure I was myself. But yes, I was thinking straight, I was thinking soundly! That shadow was the

symbol, the spectre of my real life. I was really lying flat on the ground, and everybody could walk on me with impunity. To such depths the late Mattia Pascal had fallen! He lay buried back there in the cemetery at Miragno. His ghost, his shadow, was walking the streets of Rome!

That shadow had a heart, and it could not love! That shadow had money, and anyone could steal it. That shadow had a head, and the head could think, could think just enough to understand that it was the head of a shadow but not the shadow of a head! Just so, ladies and gentlemen!

How it ached, that head! It ached as though all those wheels and hoofs had really passed over it, pinching, crushing, bruising it. Well, why not lift it out of the gutter for a while?

A street car came along; and I leapt aboard... On my way back to my house.

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