The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 16 – Minerva's picture

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

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Chapter 16
Minerva's picture

Quite before the door was opened to my ring, I knew that something serious had happened inside: I could hear the voices of Papiano and Paleari away out in the street.

It was the Caporale woman who finally came, pale and in great agitation, to let me in:

"So it's true, is it?" she cried. "Twelve thousand?" I stopped in my tracks, breathless, dismayed. Scipione Papiano, the half-wit, crossed the entry at just that moment, barefooted, his shoes in his hand, and his coat off. He too was pale and

frightened.

I could hear his brother Terenzio vociferating violently:

“Well, call the police, call them, and be damned!” A flash of bitter anger at Adriana ran through me. In spite of my prohibition, in spite of her promise, she had spoken!

“Who told you that?” I almost shouted at Miss Caporale. “Nothing of the kind! I have found it again!”

The piano teacher looked at me in amazement:

“The money? Found again? Really? Oh, thank God! Thank God!” she exclaimed, raising her arms devoutly; then she ran on ahead of me into the dining room where Papiano and old Anselmo were screaming at each other at the tops of their voices, while Adriana was weeping and sobbing.

“He’s found it! He’s found it again!” Silvia called exultantly. “Here is Mr. Meis now! He’s gotten his money back!”

“What’s that?”

“Back?”

“Really?”

The three of them stood there in utter astonishment. Adriana and her father with flushed faces, however; while Papiano wild-eyed, ashen-pale, seemed staggered at the news.

I eyed him fixedly for a second. I must have been paler than he, and I was quivering from head to toe. He could not meet my gaze. His body seemed to sag at the knees. His brother’s coat fell from his grasp. I went close up to him and held out my hand:

“I’m so sorry: excuse me, please—and all the rest of you…”

“No!” cried Adriana indignantly; but she pressed her handkerchief to her mouth.

Papiano looked at her and dared not offer me his hand. Again I said:

“I beg your pardon!” And I forced my clasp upon him, for the satisfaction of sensing the tremor that was vibrating through his whole body. His hand was as limp as a rag. He had the look of a corpse, especially about his deadened glassy eyes.

“I’m extremely sorry,” I added, “for all the trouble, for the very serious trouble I have caused you—unintentionally, you may be sure…”

“Not at all,” Paleari stammered. “Not at all… or rather… yes… if I may… you see… it was something that really… yes… it couldn’t be so… there! Delighted, Mr. Meis, my congratulations … so glad you got it back… your money… because …”

Papiano passed his two hands over his perspiring brow, ran his fingers through his hair, took a deep breath and then, turning his back to us, stood looking through the French doors out upon the balcony.

“I am like the man in the story,” I began again, smiling. “I was looking for the donkey and I was on its back all the time: I had the twelve thousand lire in my pocket book! The joke is on me!”

Adriana could not stand this:

“But you looked in your pocket book, and everywhere else, in my presence; why, there, in the cabinet…”

“Yes, signorina,” I interrupted, severely and firmly; “but I couldn’t have looked carefully enough, since, now, as you see, I have found the money… I ask your pardon particularly, signorina; for this oversight on my part must have cost you more suffering than any of the others. I hope however that

now…”

“No! No! No!” cried Adriana, breaking into sobs and dashing out of the room with Silvia Caporale pursuing her.

“I don’t understand!” exclaimed Paleari in amazement.

Papiano turned angrily toward us:

“Well, anyhow, I’m going to clear out—today…. It would seem that now there is no further need of… of…”

He gagged, as if his breath were giving out. Finally he decided to address me, though he did not have the effrontery to look me in the eye:

“I… I couldn’t… believe me… I couldn’t even say no… when they… right here…. Why, I went right after my brother who… irresponsible … sick as he is… who could be sure?… He might have… I dragged him in here by the collar. … A terrible scene… I made him take off all his clothes… to search him… even under his shirt … and in his shoes and stockings…. And he… oh!”

At this point his voice choked again and his eyes filled with tears. Then he added in a broken, husky tone:

“Well, they were able to see… but, of course…. since you…. But after what has taken place, I am going away…!”

“No, you’re not!” I said. “By no means! On my account? No, you must stay here! I’m the one who’s going to move, if anybody is!”

“Why, the idea, Mr. Meis!” said old Anselmo in sincere protest.

Even Papiano, struggling with the tears he was trying to suppress, made a negative gesture. At last he was able to explain:

“I was… I was going away anyhow! In fact, all this happened because I… without meaning anything in the world… announced that I was intending to leave, on account of my brother, who, really, should not be kept at home any longer… Fact is… the Marquis gave me… see for yourself—I have it here—a letter for the director of a sanatorium in Naples…. I have to go to Naples anyway, for some more documents the Marquis wants…. And my sister-in-law, who holds you… quite properly… in high, in the very highest, esteem… jumps up and says no one is to leave the house… that every one of us should remain indoors … because you… well… because you had discovered…. That to me! Her own brother, you might say!… Yes sir, she said it to me…. I suppose because I… poor, I grant you, but honest after all… I am under obligations to pay to my father-in-law, Mr. Paleari here….”

“What in the world are you dreaming of now?” exclaimed Paleari, interrupting.

“No,” said Papiano, drawing up haughtily. “It’s on iny mind! I’m bearing it in mind, don’t you worry! ‘And if I go away…. Poor, poor Scipione!”

Papiano seemed unable to control his feelings any longer, and burst into tears outright.

Paleari, deeply moved and very much perplexed, did not know what to make of it all:

“Well, what’s Scipione got to do with that?”

“My poor little brother!” Papiano continued, with such a ring of sincerity in his voice that even I felt a choke gathering in my throat. I concluded that his emotion was due to an access of remorse on account of his brother, whom he had used in the venture, whom, if I reported the matter to the police, he would have blamed for the theft, and whom he had actually humiliated by the insulting search.

No one understood better than Papiano that I had not recovered the stolen money. My unexpected declaration, coming to save him just when he was thinking himself lost and was about to accuse Scipione (or, ccording to his premeditated plan, to suggest that the half-wit alone could be responsible for such a thing), had thrown him completely off his pins. He was weeping now, either from an uncontrollable necessity for giving some vent to his inner strain, or because he felt that he could not face me except in tears. These tears, clearly enough, were an overture of peace to me. He was kneeling in. humble surrender at my feet; but on one condition: that I stick to what I had said about finding the money again; for if, profiting by his present abasement, I were to return to my charge, he would rise against me in a fury. Put it this way: he did not know, he was never to know, anything at all about the theft. My generous falsehood was saving only his brother, who, as I should understand, could not be punished anyhow, in view of the boy's mental infirmity. On his side, I should observe, he was pledging himself indirectly but clearly, to repay the Paleari dowry.

All this I read in his tears. But at last, Anselmo's exhortations and my own prevailed upon him to master his agitation. He said he would go to Naples but return the moment he had found a good hospital for his brother, _cashed certain interests he owned in a business he had recently started with a friend_, and copied the papers the Marquis needed.

"By the way," he concluded, turning now to me; "it had quite gone out of my mind. The Marquis requested me to invite you for today, if you are free… along with my father-in-law and Adriana…"

"Oh, that's a good idea," exclaimed Anselmo, without letting him finish: "Yes, we'll all go! Splendid! We have good excuse for a bit of diversion now. What do you say, Mr. Meis? Shall we go?"

“So far as I am concerned…” I said, with a gesture of compliance.

“Well, shall we make it four o’clock then?” Papiano proposed, wiping his eyes for good this time.

I went to my room, my thoughts all on Adriana, who had answered my story about the money by running away from us in tears. Supposing she should come now and demand an explanation? Certainly she could not have believed what I said. What then, could she be thinking? That, in denying the theft, I had intended to punish her for breaking her promise? Why had I done so,—come to think of it? Of course—because the lawyer whom I had gone out to consult before bringing criminal charges, had assured me that she, and everybody else in the house, would be brought under suspicion. She, to be sure, had announced her willingness to face the scandal; but I, obviously, could not allow that—just for the sake of twelve thousand lire! She, accordingly, could interpret such generosity on my part as a sacrifice made out of love for her!

Another humiliating lie forced upon me by my circumstances—a loathsome lie which credited me with an exquisite and delicate act of unselfishness all the finer because in no sense had she requested or desired it! Was this the way I should reason?

Why no! Not at all, not at all! Was I crazy?

Following the logic of my necessary and inevitable falsehood, I could reach quite different conclusions. Bosh, this notion of generosity, of sacrifice, of affection! Could I engage the poor child’s emotions any further? No, I must suppress, I must strangle my own passion, and neither speak to Adriana again, nor look at her again in any intimate way. Well, in that case, how could she reconcile my apparent generosity with the demeanor I should henceforth maintain toward her? Along this line I would be forced to use her revelation of the theft—a revelation which I repudiated at the first

opportunity—as a pretext for breaking off relations with her! But was there any sense to that? No, there were but two possibilities: either I had lost the money—in which case, why was it I did not have the thief arrested, but, instead, withdrew my affection from her as though she were the guilty one? Or else, I had really gotten my money back—in which case, why should I cease loving her?

A sense of nausea, disgust, loathing for myself seized upon me. At least I should be able to explain to her that there was no whit of kindness involved in the matter, that I took no legal steps, because I couldn't, because I couldn't!… Well, I would have to give some reason…. I couldn't let it drop like that!… Perhaps I had stolen the money myself in the first place! Yes, she might easily draw that conclusion! I could let her think so!…

Or I could explain that I was a fugitive from persecution, a man in trouble, compelled to drop out of sight and so unable to share his lot with a wife!

Lies, lies, nothing but lies for that poor innocent creature!

Well, the truth, perhaps? A truth so improbable that even I who had lived it could hardly believe it so! Could I tell her such an absurd tale, such a disordered fancy? And in that case, to avoid one more lie, I should have to confess that I had told nothing but lies hitherto! That would be all a truthful explanation could possibly amount to! And it would neither make me less of a scoundrel nor ease her suffering!

I do believe that in the state of exasperation and disgust in which I then found myself, I would have made a clean breast of everything to Adriana, if, instead of sending Silvia Caporale, she had come to my room herself to tell me why she had gone back on her promise not to talk.

For that matter, I knew already from what Papiano had said. Miss Caporale added that Adriana was inconsolable.

“Why should she be?” I asked with forced indifference.

“Because,” the piano teacher answered, “she does not believe you have found the money!”

It occurred to me just then—an impulse quite in harmony, moreover, with my mood at the time—that one way out of it would be to make Adriana lose all respect for me, let her think me a hard, selfish, treacherous trifler whom she could not love. That would serve me right for the harm I had done her! She would be terribly hurt for a while to be sure, but in the end she would be the gainer.

“She doesn’t believe it? How is that?” And I smiled shrewdly at the Caporale woman. “Twelve thousand lire, signorina! That much money doesn’t grow on every bush! Do you think I would be as cheerful as I am, if I had really lost it?”

“But Adriana said…” she tried to add.

“Nonsense! Plain nonsense!” I continued, interrupting. “It’s true that… look… I did suspect for a moment; but I also told Miss Paleari that I could not believe such a thing possible…. And, in fact… well, you say it for me… what reason could I have for claiming I had recovered the money if I hadn’t?”

Miss Caporale shrugged her shoulders:

“Perhaps Adriana thinks you may have some reason…”

“But I told you no! And no it is!” I hurriedly interjected. “Remember it was a matter of twelve thousand lire…. Now a lire or two would not have made much difference…. But twelve thousand!… My generosity is not so great as all that…. She must be thinking I’m a hero!…”

When Silvia Caporale went away to report to Adriana, I wrung my hands, and dug my teeth into my knuckles! Was that the way to go about it—as it were, trying to pay her for her crushed illusions in my regard with the money they had stolen from me?

Could any thing be meaner, cheaper, more cowardly? I thought of her in the next room there, raging at me probably, despising me, not being in a position to understand that her grief was my grief too. Yet, that was the way it had to be! She had to hate me, despise me, as I hated and despised myself. What was more, to increase that hatred and contempt, I would now be very courteous toward Papiano—her enemy—as though to compensate him in her eyes for the suspicions I and she had had of him. And my thief himself would be disconcerted, confounded, even to the point of thinking me perhaps a lunatic….

What was left? Could I do anything worse? Yes … one thing! We were going to the Giglios'. That very day I would begin paying open court to Pepita Pantogada!

"That will make you scorn me more than ever, Adriana," I groaned, writhing on my bed. "What else, what else, can I do for you?"

Shortly after four o'clock old Anselmo, in formal dress, came and knocked on my door.

"I'm all ready!" I called, rising and throwing on my coat.

"Are you going that way?" asked Paleari in astonishment.

"Why?" I asked.

But then I noticed that I had on a Scottish cap with a visor, that I usually wore about the house. I put it into my pocket and reached for my hat, while Anselmo stood chuckling and chuckling to himself….

"Where are you going, Mr. Paleari?" I asked, as he suddenly turned away.

"Why, I'm as daft as you are," he answered, pointing to his feet. "I was going in my slippers! Just step into the other room, Mr. Meis. Adriana is there and…"

“What, is she coming too?”

“She didn’t want to,” called Paleari, moving along toward his quarters. “But I made her change her mind! … She’s in the dining-room, with her things on…”

With what cold and severe reproachfulness Miss Caporale stared at me as I entered the room! Caught in a hopeless passion herself, she had been so often comforted by this simple inexperienced little child! Now that Adriana understood what the world was like, now that Adriana had been hurt, Silvia rushed grateful and solicitous to her rescue. Whatright had I to make such a good and pretty little child unhappy? As for herself, Silvia—neither good nor pretty—men might have some excuse for being mean to her! But not to Adriana! Not to Adriana!

This she seemed to be saying with her eyes as she invited me to survey the wreckage I had made in the life beside her. And in truth, how pale, how bravely pale, Adriana was! Her eyes were red with weeping.

What an anguished effort it must have cost to get up and dress to go out for an afternoon—with me!

* * *

Notwithstanding the state of mind in which I went on the party, the personality and the home of the Marquis Giglio d’Auletta aroused some curiosity in me. I knew the reason for his residence in Rome: he saw no possible way to the restoration of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies except through the victory of the Temporal Power: once the Pope couldrecover his capital, the Kingdom of Italy might go to pieces, and in the upset … who could tell? The Marquis was not strong on prophesying! One thing at a time! Attend to the job in front of you! For the moment—war, without asking or giving quarter, and in the Clerical camp! And his salon, in fact, was the rallying place of the most intransigent prelates of the Curia,

and the most valorous laic champions of the Blacks.

On that day, however, we found no other callers in the vast and sumptuous drawing-room. Conspicuous, in the middle of the floor, was a painter's easel with a canvas about half finished: it was Minerva, Pepita's lap-dog, a black little beast, stretched out on a white sofa, her pointed snout resting on her two front paws.

"By Bernaldez, the Spanish artist!" announced Papiano gravely, as though he were making an introduction that required an unusually low bow from the rest of us.

Pepita Pantogada came in, followed, shortly, by her governess, Signora Candida.

On previous occasions, I had seen these two women in the semi-darkness of my room; now, tinder a full light, Miss Pantogada seemed a different woman, not as a whole perhaps, but in respect of her nose. What? Had I ever seen that nose before? I had imagined it as a small upturned affair, impudent rather than not. But no: it was strong, robust, aquiline.

A stunning girl, all the same! Dark complexion, flashing black eyes, coal black hair, wavy and shiny. Thin lips, sharp, keen, sarcastic, bright red. Painted, almost—rather than fitted—on her slender shapely form, a dark dress with white lace-work.

The soft placid beauty of the blond Adriana faded under the brilliancy of this superior glow.

And, bless me, at last I solved the mystery of that steeple on Signora Candida's head. It was… it was first of all: a magnificent blondish wig of waved hair; and pitched, if I may say so, on the wig, a sort of tent—a broad light-blue kerchief, or mantilla, of silk, that was drawn down and knotted coyly under her chin. A magnificent frame, truly for such a plain, lean, angular, washed-out face, which inches of

rouge and powder and—so forth, could not improve.

Meantime Minerva was barking so vociferously that we were hardly able to exchange formalities. But the poor doggie was not barking at us. She was barking at the easel, and at the white sofa, which she remembered as instruments of torture apparently. The protest and lament of an incensed soul! Yelp! Get out of this room! Yelp! Get out of this room! But the easel stood there unperturbed on its three legs; so Minerva retreated slowly on her four, barking, showing her teeth, returning to the charge, retreating again, in terrible commotion.

A fat chubby body on four over-slender legs, Minerva was not a pretty dog. Many times grandmother, I imagine: there was no sparkle in her eyes, and her hair had turned gray in places. On her back, just forward of her tail, was a bare spot, resulting from the habit she had of scratching herself furiously on the rungs of chairs, on the corners of book-cases, on anything hard and sharp that would reach that particular trouble.

This I knew already, however.

Finally Pepita seized Minerva by the nape of the neck and tossed her at Signora Candida, scolding:

"_Cito_!" which was Pantogadese for "_zitto_"—"shut up!"

And Don Ignazio Giglio d'Auletta came hurrying in. He trotted—so round-shouldered he bent almost double—to an arm-chair he always sat in next to a window, fell into his seat, brought his cane to rest between his two legs, and finally sighed a heavy sigh and smiled a wan smile at his mortal weariness. His face, clean-shaven, shrunken, furrowed all over with deep vertical wrinkles, was of a corpselike pallor, in contrast with his gleaming, ardent, almost youthful eyes. Down over his cheeks, his temples, and the sides of his head, thick shags of hair trickled like tongues of wet ashes.

Speaking in an obstrusive Neapolitan sing-song, the Marquis welcomed us with great cordiality, asking his secretary to continue showing me the mementos of which the room was full—all testimonials of his fidelity to the Bourbon dynasty. Here was a small framed picture, as I took it to be, curtained by a green cloth which bore, in letters of gold, the legend: NON NASCONDO: RIPARO. ALZAMI E LEGGI (I conceal not, but defend: lift me and read!). The Marquis asked Papiano to take down the picture and bring it to him. It was not a picture at all, but a letter (framed under glass) through which Pietro Ulloa, writing in September, 1860 (among the last gasps of the Two Sicilies, that is) invited the Marquis Giglio d'Auletta to assume a portfolio in the Cabinet (which was destined never to take office). In the margins was a transcript of the Marquis's acceptance, a ringing document, the latter, branding with infamy those men of prominence in the realm who, in the moment of supreme danger and anguish for their Sovereign, with the filibusterer Garibaldi hammering at the gates of Naples, declined to shoulder the responsibilities of Power.

As the old Marquis enunciated these documents aloud, he became so wrought up that I could not help admiring him, though everything he said offended my sensibilities as an Italian. He too, besides, had been a hero after his fashion; as I learned from a story he told in comment on a fleur-de-lis in gilded wood, that was also on show in the parlor there.

It happened on the fifth of September, 1860. The King was leaving the Royal Palace in an open carriage attended only by the Queen and a few gentlemen of the court. On the _Via di Ghiaja_, the carriage was held up by a jam in the traffic in front of a pharmacy which bore the sign of the lilies-of-gold. A ladder running up to the side of the building from the middle of the street was the cause of the congestion. Carpenters were at work on top of the ladder, removing the lilies from the front of the shop. The King called the Queen's attention to that act of cowardice on the part of the

druggist, who in more peaceful times had been only too glad to vaunt his royal brevet as an honor to his store. Well, he, the Marquis d'Auletta, happened to be passing at the moment; and in a rage of indignant loyalty, he ran into the shop, collared the offending pharmacist, pointed to the King out in the street, spat in the man's face, and went away, brandishing one of the fallen lilies as a trophy: "_Viva il Re_!"

The Marquis was as proud of that old shop-sign as he was of this Golden Fleece, his keys as a Gentleman of the King's Chamber, his trappings as a Chevalier of Saint Gennaro, and all the other decorations on display in the drawing-room under two full length portraits of their Majesties Ferdinand and Francis Second.

As soon as I could, I broke away from Papiano and Paleari to execute my base design: I approached Pepita Pantogada.

It did not take me long to see that the young lady was in a very bad humor with a case of nerves. She first wanted to know what time it was:

"_Quattro e meccio_? Four firty? Vary well! Vary well!"

That she was not overjoyed to find it was "four firty" I gathered from the tone of the "vary well's," and from the voluble and—in the circumstances—bad-mannered tirade, on which she then launched out, agaipst Italy in general and against Rome in particular—Rome so stuck up over its blessed "glories of the Past?" The Colosseum? What was the Colosseum? They had a Colosseum, _también_, in Spain, just as big and just as old—"and we don't swell up and burst every time we walk by it. Pile of dirty stone, _piedra muerta_, anyhow!" "If you want to know what a theatre is, come to Spain and see one of our _Plazas de Toros_. And your old paintings! Why—I'd rather have this picture of Minerva here, that Bernaldez is poking along trying to finish in time for Kingdom Come!"

Yes, that was it! Pepita wanted that picture and she wanted it

right away. It was “four firty” and Bernaldez had not appeared! She fidgeted around on her chair, rubbed her nose, opened and closed her hands, with her eyes fastened on the drawing-room door.

At last the butler announced Bernaldez; and the painter came into the room, panting and perspiring as though he had had the run of his life. But Pepita’s attitude at once changed. With a flounce she turned her back on him and stared the other way, affecting an air of cool and collected indifference. Bernaldez went over and shook hands with the Marquis, bowed to us each in turn and then approached Pepita, speaking in Spanish and begging pardon for his tardiness. Pepita now boiled over, and when she spoke, it was in a torrent of Pantogadese:

“First of all, you speak Italian, since these people do not know Spanish, and I think it bad manners for you to use Spanish with me. In the second place, I Care not for you, for your picture, for you come late, for your excuse, for nothing!”

Bernaldez did the best a fellow could do in such a case: he smiled nervously, he bowed chivalrously; finally he asked if he might resume work on the picture since there would be still an hour of light.

“As you say!” she answered in the same manner. “You paint the picture without me, or you rub it all out—it is one to me!”

Bernaldez bowed again, and turned to Signora Candida who was still holding the dog Pepita had thrown into her arms.

Poor Minerva’s hour of torture was beginning again; but her suffering was as nothing compared to that of her executioner. To punish Bernaldez for being late, Pepita began to flirt with me and with an ardor that seemed to me excessive even for the purpose I had in view. A glance in Adriana’s direction warned me of the extent of that poor girl’s distress—it could not, for that matter have been much greater than Minerva’s, nor

Manuel Bernaldez's, nor mine. I could feel my face naming redder and redder, as though I were intoxicated with the anger I knew I was arousing in that unfortunate young man. I had no pity for him, but just a fiendish delight in his torment. My thoughts were all for Adriana. She was being hurt to the quick: why should he not be also? In fact, I seemed to feel that the more he suffered, the less her pain might be. Certain it was that the air in the room was becoming electric with a tension that must soon reach the breaking point.

It was Minerva who brought on the storm. Since Pepita was sitting with her back to the easel and the sofa, the little dog was not being cowed as usual by her mistress's sharp eyes; so the moment the painter turned to his canvas, Minerva would cautiously rise from her "pose," and first one paw forward and then another, eventually get her nose and head under the cushions, as though she were trying to hide. At any rate, when Bernaldez would turn around again, he would find himself confronted not by his pose, but by the hind legs and the curly upturned tail of his unwilling subject.

Several times already Signora Candida had put Minerva in place again. Bernaldez fuming with rage meantime, and commenting under his breath on a word of endearment that he would catch every now and then from Pepita's conversation with me. I say, under his breath. His remarks were not always inaudible, exactly; and more than once I was tempted to inquire:

"Did you say something, Mr. Bernaldez?"

Finally his patience gave out and he exploded:

"Miss Pantogada, will you at least be kind enough to keep this little bitch of yours where she belongs?"

"Vitch? Vitch? Vitch?" cried Pepita, jumping to her feet and turning upon the poor painter, livid with rage; "you dare call my dog a vitch?"

“But a dog doesn’t mind coarse language!” I was unhappily prompted to observe.

I didn’t realize, at the moment, that a man in Bernaldez’s state of excitement might catch an allusion where none in the least was intended. I was not criticizing his choice of words, nor did I even think that he might take my “dog” as referring to himself. But he broke out:

“My language is no business of yours, monsieur!”

Under his fixed aggressive provoking stare, I felt my temper begin to rise. I could not help replying:

“I must say, Signor Bernaldez, you may be a great painter…”

“What’s the matter?” piped the Marquis, noticing our hostile mood.

Bernaldez dropped his brush and his palette and strode over till his face was a few inches from mine:

“… a great painter?… Say what you were going to say, monsieur!”

“… a great painter, yes… but your manners aren’t all they might be; and besides, you frighten the dog!”

There was a sting of contempt in the tone of every word I uttered.

“Yes,” said he, “but we’ll see whether it’s only four-legged dogs that are afraid of me!” And he drew back.

Pepita now began to shriek hysterically, and she. had technique enough to fall fainting into the arms of Pa-piano and Signora Candida.

In the confusion I turned my attention, naturally, to the girl, whom they were easing on a sofa. But I suddenly felt a clutch on my arm: Bernaldez was upon me. I was just in time

to parry the blow he had aimed at my face, and to throw him back with a hard push. Again he rushed, barely missing my cheek with a furious stroke. It was my turn to attack: but Papiano and Paleari had jumped between us. Bernaldez was backing out of the room, shaking his fist at me:

“Consider yourself thrashed, monsieur. Consider yourself thrashed! I am at your service at any time! The people here know my address!”

The Marquis was standing in front of his chair, trembling and shouting. I was struggling to get free from Paleari and Papiano to pursue my assailant. The Marquis at last was able to make himself heard:

“You are a gentleman,” said he. “You must send two of your friends to settle your accounts with this fellow. To me, he must explain how he dared attack a guest of mine in my house!”

I was quivering with excitement, and barely had breath enough to wish the Marquis good-day. I left at once, followed by Papiano and old Anselmo. Adriana remained to assist in reviving Pepita, whom they had carried to another room.

Now I had the privilege of getting down on my knees to the thief who had robbed me and asking him, along with Paleari, to be my second. To whom else could I appeal?

“Me?” asked Anselmo in honest stupor, “Me? Why, my dear Mr. Meis, you must be joking? Me? Never in the world. Why, I know nothing about such business. … All nonsense, anyhow! Really now, isn’t it?”

“You must!” I retorted energetically, not choosing to begin an argument at just that moment. “You and Mr. Papiano will be so good as to go at once to that gentleman’s house…”

“I? I? Not a single step, my dear boy! Ask me anything else—at your service! But just this? No sir! Not my line, in the first

place! And anyhow—nonsense! Nothing serious! Little rumpus like that! Why so excited?”

“No, you’re wrong there!” interrupted Papiano, noticing my furious rage. “It is a serious matter! Mr. Meis has a right to demand satisfaction. In fact, he’s in honor bound to demand satisfaction. He’s got to fight! He’s got to fight!…”

“So you, then!” I said. “You go, with a friend of yours…”

I had not expected a refusal from Papiano; but he opened his arms in a gesture of apologetic helplessness.

“You know how I should like to help you out… but…”

“You won’t?” I stormed, stopping in the middle of the street.

“Wait! Let me explain, Mr. Meis!” he answered humbly. “Just see!… Listen!… Notice the fix I’m in! Remember I’m bound hand and foot—secretary, servant, slave… of the Marquis…”

“What’s that got to do with it? The Marquis himself … don’t you remember?”

“Yes, I know… but tomorrow? A Clerical! And the Party!… His private secretary mixed up in a duel! The end of me, I can tell you! And besides—that little wench, there… didn’t you get the point? Head over heels in love with Bernaldez!… Tomorrow, they kiss and make up!… And then where do I stand, eh? The end of me! So sorry, Mr. Meis… but try to understand my position… just as I say…”

“So you’re both going to ditch me!” I answered, at my wits’ end. “I don’t know another soul here in Rome…”

“But listen, there’s a way, there’s a way!” Papiano hastened to advise. “I was going to suggest…. You see both my father-in-law here, and I, would find it difficult … impossible, in fact…. You are right, no question of that! You’re right! Every reason to see it through! Can’t overlook a matter like this….

Well, you just apply to two officers in the army…. They can't refuse to represent a gentleman in an affair of honor…. You go to them, explain how it all happened. … They often do such favors for people not known in town…"

We had reached the door of the house.

"So you won't! Very well!" I said to Papiano. And I turned on my heel without another word, walking away aimlessly, my brain reeling from my over-wrought emotion.

Again the thought of my crushing, my annihilating impotence had taken possession of my whole consciousness. Could a man in my circumstances fight a duel? Could I never get it through my head that I could no longer do one single blessed thing? Two army officers! Excellent! But, just as a starter—two very proper questions: "Who was I?" "Where did I come from?" No: the plain simple fact: people could spit on me, slap my face, thrash me with a whip: and I could ask them to lay on a little harder, please, but, for heaven's sake, to be quiet about it! Two army officers! And let me give them just the least wee little inkling of my real status—well, in the first place, they wouldn't believe me, and who knows what they might suspect? In the second place, I would be as badly off as with Adriana: if they did believe, they would suggest I come to life again; since a dead man—what's the use?—had no standing vis-a-vis of the code of honor!

So I could swallow—a good appetite to you!—the insult of Bernaldez as I had swallowed the theft of Papiano; slink away with my dignity wounded, my courage challenged—yes, with my face slapped—slink away like a coward, out of sight, into the dark again, the dark of an intolerable future where I would be an object of hateful loathing even to myself. Future, indeed? Could there be any future? How could I go on living? How endure the sight of myself? No, enough of this, enough of this!

I stopped, everything whirling dizzily about me, my legs giving way at the knees. A sinister impulse rose suddenly in my heart, giving me a cold shiver of horror from head to foot.

“But before _that_,” I said to myself, my brain rambling, “before _that_, why not try? If I should succeed. … But try anyhow… just to get back a little of my own self-respect! If I should succeed… not quite such a craven coward in my own eyes… and what’s there to lose by trying? Why not try?”

I was a few blocks away from the _Caffe Aragno_.

“There! There! Catch as catch can! The first one I come to!”

In my blind agony, I went in.

In the outside room, around a table, sat five or six artillery officers; and when one of them noticed me standing there, pale, wild-eyed, hesitating, I bowed to him slightly, and with faltering voice began:

“I’m sorry… excuse me… might I have a word with you?”

He was a beardless young chap, hardly graduated from the Academy, it seemed to me. He rose, and came over toward me, answering me courteously:

“What can I do for you, Signore?”

“Why, it’s this way—may I introduce myself? Adriano Meis! I am a stranger in town. I have no friends here. I’ve had trouble… a point of honor … I need a couple of seconds… I don’t know whom I could ask…. If you and one of your friends…”

Surprised, perplexed, the man stood looking at me for a time; then turning to his comrades, he called:

“Grigliotti!”

Grigliotti was a lieutenant of the upper numbers, with an upcurled mustache, a monocle crammed willy nilly into an

eyesocket, and smooth, well-massaged cheeks. He got up from his seat, still talking to the men at the table (I noticed he spoke with “r’s” that were really “w’s”) and stepped our way, making a slight somewhat constrained bow to me. The moment I saw which man Grigliotti was, I felt like saying to my cadet: “Not that man, please! Not that man!” But, as I afterwards recognized, no one else in the group could have been so well qualified for the task in hand as he. The articles of the code of chivalry he knew from A to Z.

Such a line of talk as he gave me about my case, and all that I must do! I was to telegraph, I forget exactly what—to a certain Colonel, state my grievance, fix the main points clearly, and then go in person to see him—ça va sans dire—see the Colonel, that is, precisely as he, Grigliotti, had done once—he was not yet in the army at the time—when something similar had happened to him—in Pavia, it was. Because, in these matters of honor, you see, laws of chivalry… and so on, and so on, till my head was a whirl of articles, precedents, courts of honor, and “points well established in practice.”

I had not liked the man from the moment I set eyes on him. Imagine how I felt now when confronted with this dissertation on chivalry! Finally I could endure the strain no longer, and I exclaimed impatiently:

“But, my dear sir, that’s all very well. You’re quite right, I dare say; but how will a telegram help in my present situation? I am all alone here in a strange city, and I want to fight a duel, understand, right away, tomorrow if possible; and without so much nonsense.

“What difference does all this stuff make to me? I mentioned the matter to you gentlemen in the hope—well, excuse me—in the hope that I could get somewhere without all this—all this fussing,—there!…”

My outburst provoked an answer from Grigliotti in the same

tone, and we were soon engaged in what amounted to a brawl, both talking at the same time and at the top of our lungs. But at a certain moment loud guffaws of ridicule from the officers about me brought me up short. I turned, and hurried away, my face aflame with indignant humiliation, as though I had been whipped with a lash.

Where could I hide? The laughter of those soldiers seemed to pursue me as I fled, my hands to my head, my brain in utter confusion. Should I go home? No, I shuddered at the thought of that. I kept on walking, walking, straight ahead, frantically. At last I noticed that I had slackened my pace; and then finally I stopped, to catch my breath, to rest a little; for I had no strength left to sustain the stinging smart of that Tidicule which kept pulsing through me in waves of frenzied vengefulness.

I say that I stopped. I did stop; and I stood some moments without moving, my mind gradually becoming a blank. Then I began walking again; but now I was strangely relieved, all feelings of bitterness gone from my mind, a curious stupor replacing them.

Here was a shop window bright with its display of wares. I approached and studied the objects with a meticulous absorbing interest.

The lights went out. The stores all along the street were closing.

Yes, they were closing for me, eternally! People were going home, leaving me alone, a solitary wanderer on deserted streets, all doors and windows closed, all lights extinguished—silence and solitude for me, eternally!

I moved along.

As the city went to sleep, life itself seemed to recede from about me, as though it were something remote, intangible,

without meaning or purpose.

Had the sinister intention matured spontaneously within me? I do not know; but at last, involuntarily, guided as it were by that inner determination, I found myself on the Margherita Bridge, leaning over the parapet and gazing terror-stricken down into the black swirling stream.

“Down there, in that water?”

I shuddered….

But it was not with fear! It was a violent outburst of anger, an uprising of all my instincts of life in ferocious hatred against those who were now bringing me here to the end they had assigned me back in the Flume of “The Coops” at Miragno. Yes, those women: Romilda and the widow Pescatore! They had brought me to this pass. I would never have thought of feigning suicide to get rid of them! And yet now, after two years of living like a ghost in the illusion of a life beyond the death they had wished upon me, here I was—dragged by the collar to executing their sentence upon myself! They were right after all! I had really died like the corpse they found! They were free of me—though I was not free of them!

And I rebelled. Could I not get even with them somehow, instead of killing myself?

Suicide? How could a dead man—hah, hah!—a dead man commit suicide? A nobody commit suicide?

I straightened up, as suddenly everything seemed strangely lucid and clear to me. Get even with them! But what did that mean? It meant going back to Miragno, didn’t it? It meant shaking off the lie that had throttled me! It meant coming to life again to spite them, to chastise them, with my real name, my real personality, my very very real misfortunes? Ah yes … but my present fix! Could I cut loose from the present that easily? Could I throw aside my life in the _Via Ripetta_ as

one did a bundle of rubbish for which there is no further use? No, no! That I could not do! I knew I could not do so! So I stood there, in anguished bewilderment, uncertain as to a decision.

By chance I put my hand into my pocket and my nervous fingers came in contact with something which I did not at once recognize. With an angry twitch I pulled it out. It was the cap that I had always worn on my trains and about the house, the cap in which, to old Anselmo's delight, I had started out to make my call on the Marquis and which I had thrust into my pocket distractedly.

I was about to toss the thing into the water when, in a flash, an idea came to me. Something I had thought of long before on my trip from Alenga to Turin rose clearly to my consciousness.

"Here," I muttered almost involuntarily to myself, "here on the railing of this bridge… my hat… my cane…. Yes… just as they did on the bank of the mill-flume at Miragno…. There, Mattia Pascal… here, I—Adriano Meis…. Tit for tat!… I come to life again… to their undoing!…"

The joy that seized on me amounted to an exultant inspiring frenzy. Of course, of course! To kill myself—the self which they had killed, would be absurd, absurd! I must kill rather the ridiculous fiction which had tortured and tormented me for two long years! I must put an end to that wretch of an Adriano Meis, who, to live at all, had to be a coward, a liar, a worthless miserable outcast! Adriano Meis! A false name for a mannikin, with a brain of sawdust, a heart of rags, and veins perhaps of rubber, with colored water for a weak diluted blood!
Away with such an odious fiction—drown him as they had drowned Mattia Pascal!

Exactly: tit for tat! First their turn, and now mine! Adriano Meis, a ghastly life springing from a ghastly lie! Finish him

then, with another falsehood just as gruesome!

And that was a way out of everything! What better reparation could I make to Adriana for the wrong I had done her? But… could I swallow the insult from that boor of a Spaniard? The coward—assailing me there by surprise, under conditions where a fight was impossible! Could I swallow it? I, the I that was really I, had not a trace of fear for the man. Of that I was sure. He had not insulted me. He had insulted Adriano Meis. Well, Adriano Meis could swallow anything. Of course he could: was he not killing himself?

Yes, that was the way, the only way, out. I was trembling from head to foot, as though I were really about to kill someone; but my brain was clear as crystal, my heart light with a sudden buoyancy that was almost gay.

I looked about me. Over in that direction, on the _Lungotevere_, someone must have noticed me standing on the bridge at that hour, a policeman perhaps, on lookout for just such tragedies. I had to make sure; so I walked along, first into the _Piazza della Liberta_, then along the river boulevard—the _Lungotevere dei Mellini_.

No one!

I retraced my steps; but before going out on the bridge again, I stopped under a street lamp in the shadow of some trees.

My notebook!

I tore out a page and wrote on it in pencil; “Adriano Meis.” Anything else? Well, my address, perhaps; yes, and the date! That would do! That would tell the whole story! Adriano Meis—his hat and his cane!

As for the rest—well, a few clothes, and a few books! I could leave them back at the house! Nothing much! The money left from the robbery I had with me.

I stole along the bridge, bending low behind the railing. My legs were shaking under me and my heart was all athrob. I selected the darkest spot over the river, took off my hat, slipped the note behind the ribbon, and set the hat with my cane on the broad stone top of the parapet. On my head I crammed the cap I so luckily had with me—the cap that had suggested to me the means of my escape; and keeping to the shadows, I moved stealthily away, sneaking along like a thief in the dark, not daring to turn my head

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