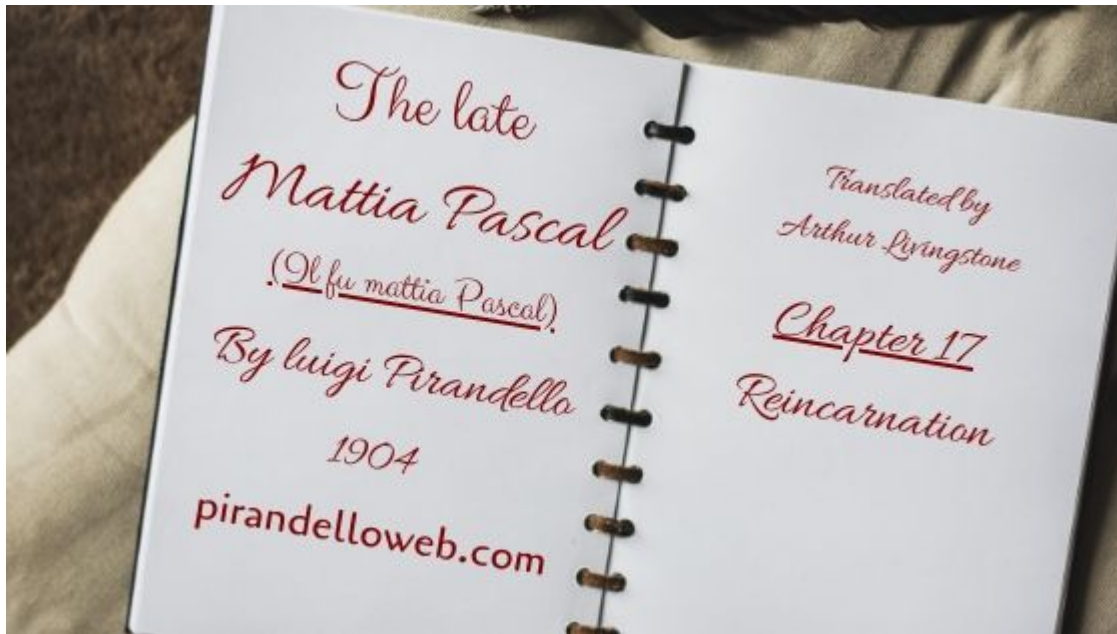


The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 17 – Reincarnation

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

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



The Late Mattia Pascal Chapter 17 Reincarnation

I reached the station in time for the Pisa express that left shortly after midnight.

I bought my ticket and found a corner seat in a second-class compartment. There I took my place at once, sitting with the visor of my cap pulled down over my eyes, not so much in fear of being seen as of seeing.

But I could see just the same, in my mind's eye: I could see the broad-brimmed hat and the cane lying there on the parapet of the bridge where I had left them. Already, at that very moment perhaps, someone was passing and would notice them; or perhaps, a policeman on patrol had found them and given the

alarm at the station-house! And I was still in Rome! What might be the outcome? I could scarcely breathe in my anxiety.

But at last the train started, with a jerk. Thank Heaven! I was alone in the compartment! I sprang to my feet, raised my arms above my head, and as though a millstone had suddenly been removed from my chest, drew one long endless breath of relief. Ah! At last I was alive again—myself: Mattia Pascal. I could shout it out loud to everybody now: I, I, Mattia Pascal! I am not dead! Look at me: here I am: Mattia Pascal! Oh, no fear henceforth of self-betrayal! And I was through with falsehood and deceit! Not just yet, to be sure—not, really, till I should reach Miragno! There I must first declare myself, have my status as a living person recognized, regraft my life to its buried roots.

What a crazy notion! The idea of ever supposing I could live apart from my original personality! And yet, and yet—see the way it goes: on my other journey, the trip from Alenga to Turin, I had thought myself just as happy as I felt now! Lunatic! “Freedom! Freedom!” So I had said—thinking of it as a liberation from all that had been! Freedom! Bah! A pretty freedom—with the leaden weight of falsehood on my shoulders—a leaden mantle for a ghost in Malebolge! Well, now I would be getting a wife back again, and that mother-in-law... But hadn't I felt their presence just as keenly when a “dead” man? Now, at least, I was alive, and with some experience in warfare. We'll see! We'll see!

As I thought of the matter now, it seemed hardly believable that I could have cut myself off from society in such a frivolous, haphazard, nonchalant way, two years before. And I pictured myself as I had been during those first days, blissfully happy in my carefree world in Turin (a world of madness, I could see it was now!); and then, as I gradually became later on in my wanderings from town to town—silent, solitary, shut up in the enjoyment of what I then thought was happiness; then Germany, the Rhine, on an excursion steamer...

Was that a dream? By no means! Gospel truth! I had been there! Ah, had I been able to live on in that state of mind, traveling forever as a visitor to this life! But soon afterwards, at Milan... that poor puppy I had wanted to buy from the old match-seller... Yes, I was beginning to understand, even then... And after that... ah, yes: after that!

In one leap, my mind was back in Rome... I saw myself stealing like a ghost into my deserted house. Were they all abed, and sleeping? All except Adriana, probably! She would be waiting up for me to come home. Surely they must have told her I had gone off looking for two seconds, for a duel with Bernaldez. She had not heard me come in yet. She would be afraid, and in tears...

I pressed my hands to my face as a violent pang clutched at my heart... "Oh, my Adriana, my little Adriana!" I groaned. "And yet, for you I could never really be alive. Better therefore if you know that I am dead, that those lips are dead which once snatched a kiss from yours. Poor Adriana! Oh, try to forget me! Try to forget!"

What would happen in the house next morning, when a policeman would come to investigate my suicide? What reason, in their first stupefaction, would they give to account for it? The duel I was about to have? No, that would hardly seem convincing. Strange, to say the least, that a man who had never shown himself a coward, should kill himself rather than fight! Well then? Perhaps because I had not found my seconds? Nonsense! So then... who knows?... there was probably some mystery at the bottom of the strange life I led...

Yes, yes, that conclusion was inevitable. Here I was, killing myself, without any apparent reason, without having betrayed the remotest intention of so doing. Oh, to be sure, I had been acting rather queerly—that mixup over the money, first claiming it was stolen and then saying I had found it again... But... "Do you suppose the money didn't really belong to him?"

Perhaps he had to pay it back to somebody, and was working up an excuse—saying they had stolen it... later on, repenting, and finally killing himself? You never can tell! One thing certain—he was a most mysterious man: never a friend to call on him, never a letter, at any time, from anybody...”

How much better it would have been, had I written something on that note—a word or two besides my name, my address, and the date—some reason or other for my suicide... But at that time and in that place!... And what reason, if you come to that?

“Who knows what the newspapers will say,” I thought, my mind jumping from point to point. “What a fuss they can make over this mysterious Adriano Meis! One thing I may be sure of: my cousin, Mr. Francesco

Meis, of Turin, the assistant tax collector, will step forward to tell all he knows, and more too. They will follow that clue—and who can guess what will come of it? Yes, but the money—the money I ought to leave someone? Adriana saw all the bills I had... Poor Papiano! A bee-line for the cabinet ... only to find it empty! So then—lost? In the river on his body? What a shame! What a pity! How mad Papiano will be that he didn’t steal everything at once! The police will take charge of my clothes and books. ... Who will get them in the end! Oh, some little thing at least, for Adriana—just as a remembrance! What anguish for her now to look in at my deserted room...!”

So I rambled on from supposition to supposition, from memory to memory, from fear to fear, as my train sped northward. I could not sleep from the tumult of emotions within me.

I considered it prudent to stop off for some days in Pisa to avoid any chance association of the reappearance of Mattia Pascal in Miragno with the disappearance of Adriano Meis in Rome, a relationship likely to occur to someone if the newspapers of the capital made any great feature of my suicide. At Pisa I could see both the morning and evening editions. If no particular mention was made of Adriano Meis, I

would go on to Oneglia, before turning toward home, to try out on brother Berto the effect of my resurrection. But even to him I must avoid making the slightest reference to my residence in Rome, to my adventures there, and their outcome. The two years and some months of my absence I could fill in with fantastic stories of distant travels abroad... And now alive again, I could take an honest pleasure in lying, bragging even of prowesses beyond those of Mr. Tito Lenzi, Chevalier of the Crown!

Fifty-two thousand lire left! Surely my creditors, supposing me to be dead, had helped themselves to the remaining title I had to "The Coops" and the mill. The sale of that property had probably realized enough to satisfy them after a fashion. No, they wouldn't trouble me any more. And I would take care to avoid messes in the future you may be sure! Fifty-two thousand lire! That amount of money in a place like Miragno... Couldn't call it wealth, exactly... but a good comfortable living, and some to spare!...

On getting out of the train at Pisa, my first move was to buy a hat of the style and dimensions that the late Mattia Pascal had worn in his time; and my second was to make for a barber-shop to get the long hair of that imbecile, Adriano Meis, off my head.

"A nice close clip, eh?" I suggested to the barber.

My beard had already come out a bit; and with my hair short, again, I was beginning to look natural—natural, with a bit of an improvement, perhaps: a little more sleek and natty, a shade more genteel... For one thing, I had had my eye fixed. In that respect, I had lost one of the distinctive features of the late Mattia Pascal. Something of Adriano Meis there would always be in my face; but, for the rest, how like brother Berto I looked!... I should never have dreamed of such a close resemblance!

In order not to present myself in too evident transiency at a hotel, I bought a travelling bag, with the further thought that I could use it for the suit and overcoat I was wearing at the moment. I would have to get a brand new outfit. Small chance there would be that my wife, at Miragno, had kept any of my clothes this length of time. I bought a ready-made suit in a store and kept it on, proceeding to the Hotel Neptune with my new valise.

I had been at Pisa once as Adriano Meis, and on that occasion I had stopped at the Hotel London. Now there was nothing in the city to interest me as a sightseer. Fatigued with my night's journey and the nerve-racking experiences of my previous day, when I had quite forgotten to eat, I took a quick breakfast and went straight to bed.

I slept till late afternoon; and when I awoke it was with a horrible sense of depression and anguish. I had passed that critical day in deep unconscious slumber—but how had things been going back there in the Paleari household? Confusion, dismay, the morbid curiosity of strangers, suspicions, hypotheses, insinuations, fruitless investigations; my clothes and my books fingered and stared at with the consternation which the exhibits in a tragedy always inspire! And I had been sleeping! And I would have to wait in my present impatience till the following morning to see what the Roman newspapers had to say.

Since I dared not go on to Miragno nor even as far as Oneglia I would have to remain for two, three, who knows how many days, in a fine condition—dead, in Miragno, as Mattia Pascal; dead in Rome as Adriano Meis!

Having nothing else to do, I thought I would take my two corpses to walk about the streets of Pisa. And it was a pleasant diversion, I can tell you. Adriano Meis, as I said, knew Pisa like a book and he insisted on playing guide and barker to Mattia Pascal; but the latter, with so many

troublesome things on his mind, was in a detestable humor for sight-seeing; and he kept shooing away that annoying ghost in the blue glasses, the long coat, and the broad-brimmed hat:

“Ugh! Back to your river, sir! Don’t you know you’re drowned?”

But then I remembered that Adriano Meis, on his walks through those self-same streets two years before, had been just as bored with the importunities of Mattia Pascal, whom, with the same ill-humor, he had tried to shove down under the water again in the mill-flume of Miragno. As for me, I thought it better not to decide between them. O white and shining Tower of Pisa! You might lean to one side if you chose! But I? Erect, impartial, between the two impulses tugging at me! The next morning, when they got plenty good and ready, the papers from Rome began coming in. I will not aver that on reading what they said of me my mind was put quite at ease: that was too much to hope for. But I was glad to note that my suicide was treated everywhere as one of the routine items in the daily news.

They all said much the same thing: that a hat, a cane and a laconic note had been found on the Ponte Margherita; that I came from Turin; that I was an eccentric individual; that no reason for my desperate action could be established. One notice, indeed, went so far as to suggest that some “matter of the heart” was probably involved, since “the man Meis came to blows the day before with a young Spanish painter in the house of a gentleman well known in Clerical circles.” Another reported that I had been “recently troubled by financial worries.” Nothing of consequence, in short.

But an afternoon sheet, that liked an emotional note in all its articles, more unctuously expatiated on the “surprise and sorrow of the family of Chevalier Anselmo Paleari, executive-secretary, retired, under the Department of Education, with whom the man Meis resided, and who had learned to respect him for his distinguished bearing and his kindly regard for those

about him." (Thank you!) The same article also reported the challenge I had received from "the Spanish painter, signer M. B." and hinted that my suicide was due to "some secret and hopeless passion."

So I had killed myself for Pepita Pantogada!

Well, better that way! Better that way! Adriana's name had not been dragged into the affair, nor was there any reference to the theft. The police of course would pursue their investigations; but on what cluest I could start for Oneglia without fear.

* * *

On calling at Roberto's town house, I found that he was at his farm in the country for the vintage. My joy on returning to my old haunts, which I had thought I would never see again, may well be imagined; though I was not a little disturbed by my eagerness to hurry; by my fear of being recognized by some old acquaintance before I had a chance to surprise my relatives; by my foretaste of the emotion they would probably feel on suddenly finding me alive again in their presence. In fact, my excitement soon reached such a pitch that I was hardly my normal self. Everything seemed to be swimming before my eyes, and my blood ran cold. Would I never get there?

When I rang at the gate of the pretty villa which Berto had annexed along with his wife, I had the sensation of being back at last in a real world.

The butler answered the bell.

"Come right in, please!" said he, standing aside to hold the gate open. "Who shall I say is calling?"

My voice failed me quite; but with a smile that I forced, to conceal some of my agitation, I managed to stammer:

"Why... er... say... say it's... it's a friend ... an old friend of his..."

from a long way off... yes... that will do..."

At least the butler must have thought I was tongue-tied; but he showed me to a seat in the parlor, setting my valise on the floor near the hat rack.

I was now beside myself with impatience and anticipation, laughing, panting, gazing around at the bright, comfortably furnished room in which I was sitting. Would Berto never come?

Suddenly I heard a sound in the doorway through which I had entered.

It was a little child, perhaps four years old, with a toy watering-pot in one hand and a toy rake in the other. He was looking at me with all the eyes he had. A thrill of indescribable tenderness swept through me. My little nephew! Berto's oldest boy! I leaned toward him affectionately and motioned to him with my hand. But he was scared and ran away as fast as his legs could carry him.

But then I heard another door open and close. I rose to my feet, my eyes dim with tears, a convulsive grip, half laughter and half sob, catching at my throat. Roberto was before me.

"With whom have I the hon..." he began.

"Berto!" I cried, opening my arms. "Berto, don't you know me?"

At the sound of my voice, Berto turned white as a sheet, rapidly passed a hand across his eyes and forehead, and tottered as though about to fall:

"Wh-wh-why! Wh-wh-why-y!"

I rushed forward to support him, but he drew back in sheer terror.

"But it's I—Mattia! Don't be afraid! I'm not dead! See? Touch

me! It's I, Roberto! I was never more alive! There now, there now, there now!"

"Mattia! Mattia! Mattia!" my poor brother at last was able to cry, not yet ready quite to believe his eyes. "You? What in the world?... Oh! My brother! Mattia! Mattia!"

His arms were about me squeezing me till it hurt. I broke down and stood weeping like a child.

"But... tell me..." Berto at last murmured through his sobs... "Tell me! Tell me!"

"Well, it's I, don't you see? Back again! Not from the other world, oh no! I never left this disgusting one! Brace up, now! And I 'll tell you!"

But Berto would not let go of me. His hands clutching at my arms, he looked up into my face, in utter bewilderment:

"But... there... at the mill..."

"It wasn't I!... I'll tell you. They got it wrong. I was miles from Miragno at the time; but I heard about it, as you probably did, through the papers... my suicide in the Flume...";

"And it wasn't you?..." Berto asked in a more normal voice. "What have you been up to?"

"Playing dead! But don't make too much noise. I'll give you the whole story, later on. I can't, right now. I'll say this much: that I knocked about, here and there, thinking myself happy at first, you know. Then ... well... from a number of things, I decided I had made a mistake, that playing dead was not all it was cracked up to be. So here I am! I've come to life again!"

"Crazy, crazy, crazy... I always said so!" exclaimed Roberto with a smile. "But this is beyond me! You can't begin to understand how I feel, Mattia, my boy! You! My dead brother!"

You! Mattia!—Why, I can't believe it! Let me look at you! What's wrong? There's something different about you!"

"There is!" said I. "I had that peeper of mine attended to!"

"Ah yet, that's it! That's what puzzled me! I couldn't quite make you out! I don't know... your voice, all right... but I looked at you and the longer I looked... Well! Well! Well!... But... come upstairs and surprise my wife... Oh... but say ... you..."

He stopped suddenly and looked at me, his face filling with dismay:

"You are going back to Miragno?"

"Of course I am... this afternoon!"

"So you don't know, then?"

He pressed his hands to his face and groaned:

"You rascal! What have you done! What have you done! Don't you know that your wife...?"

"Dead?" I exclaimed in a paroxysm of mingled fear and eagerness.

"Worse! Worse!" said he. "She is... she's married!"

I was dumfounded. "Married?"

"Married! To Pomino! I got the announcement! A year or more ago!"

"Pomino? Pomino? Married to Ro..." I stammered. But a bitter, bitter laugh seemed to form inside me and gurgle up slowly from about my middle. At last it reached my throat and my lips. I laughed thunderously.

Roberto stood looking at me, afraid perhaps that I might really have lost my mind.

"You are glad?" he asked.

"Glad?" I bellowed. "Glad is no name for it!" And I shook him by the arm. "This news caps the climax of my good fortune!"

"What are you talking about?" exclaimed Roberto, almost angrily. "What good fortune? But you say you are going there..."

"Of course I am! This minute!"

"But don't you understand? You've got to take her back!"

"I've got to take her back? What do you mean?"

"You bet you have!" Roberto insisted. "This second marriage will be annulled and you will be obliged to take her back."

It was my turn to fall from the clouds; and the bump I received on landing was not a pleasant one.

"What are you trying to tell me?" I cried fiercely. "My wife gets married again and I... Oh say, come now! That can't be so! What crazy law..."

"It's just as I'm telling you," Berto affirmed. "Wait! My wife's brother is right here. He's a lawyer, and he'll explain the situation better than I can. Come along... or rather, no, you wait here.... My wife is not very well. Perhaps it would be better not to surprise her... I'll break the news gently... So you just sit down, eh?"

But he clung to me till he was well outside the door, as though he were afraid that if he released me for a second I might disappear again.

Left to myself I began going round and round the room like a caged lion.

"Married again! And to Pomino!... Of course, just like him!... The same wife, this time!... He, to be sure, fell in love with her first.... And she... well, why not? Rich, and wife of a Pomino!..."

And while she was getting another husband here at home. ... I, in Rome... And now I take her back!... That's a good one!"

Shortly Roberto came hurrying in at the head of a procession. I was so much upset by this time that I hardly acknowledged the welcome his wife and her family were giving me. Berto noticed my distraction, and appealed to his brother-in-law on the point I had so much at heart.

"But what kind of a law do you call that?" I interrupted after a time. "Are we governed by Turks?"

"That's the law!" the man answered with a smile. "Roberto is right. I can't quote the article word for word, but the case is provided for in the Code. The second marriage becomes null and void on the reappearance of the first spouse."

"So then," I stormed ironically. "I must take back unto myself a woman, a woman, who, to common knowledge, has been functioning for a year or more as wife to another man, said man..."

"But through a fault of yours, if I may say so, my dear Mr. Pascal!" the lawyer rejoined with another smile.

"Why my fault?" said I. "Why my fault? That estimable lady first makes a false identification of a poor devil who has fallen into a pond. Then she hurries to take out a license to marry another man! And it's my fault? And I must take her back again?"

"You must," replied the lawyer; "and you are responsible since you, Mr. Pascal, did not see fit, within the time prescribed by law for contracting a second marriage, to correct the mistake your wife made, a mistake, which, I grant you, may well have been in bad faith. You accepted her false identification, and took advantage of it. Oh, as for that, notice now—I am not saying you did wrong. On the contrary, I think you acted quite properly under the circumstances. I am

surprised, rather, that you seem inclined to go home again and get mixed up with the stupid laws regulating such matters. If I were you, I would never show up again."

The coolness of this young graduate of the law schools, the pedantic cocksureness with which he talked, at last began to anger me.

"That's because you don't know what it all means!" I replied with a shrug of my shoulders.

"Why," said he, "I can't imagine a greater piece of good luck than the one which came to you."

"You're welcome to try it for yourself," I answered, turning to Roberto without excusing myself.

But trouble was waiting for me with my brother as well.

"By the way," Berto asked me, "how did you get along all this time?"

And he rubbed his thumb with his forefinger to suggest "money."

"How did I get along?" I answered. "That's a long story! I haven't time or patience for it now. But I had plenty to live on, and I have some still. I hope you don't think I'm coming home because I'm hard up!"

"So you're really going to Miragno?" Berto persisted. "Even after what I told you?"

"I certainly am," I exclaimed. "Do you think that after all I've been through I intend to go on playing dead? Not by a long shot! No sir! I'm going to get toy papers straightened out, see that the record is clear, feel myself alive again, alive and kicking—even at the cost of taking back my wife. By the way, is the old lady still alive—the widow Pescatore?"

“Ah, that I couldn’t say,” answered Roberto. “You understand that after your wife married again... But so far as I know she is...”

“You give me cheerful news,” I remarked. “But never mind! I’ll square accounts with her. I’m not the chap I once was, you know. But I do hate to do a favor to that fool of a Pomino by taking her off his hands!”

A general laugh! The butler came in to announce that dinner was served. There was no refusing, though. I was so impatient to get on I scarcely tasted my food. But afterwards I noticed that I must have eaten well. The animal in me was awakening to the prospect of imminent combat!

Berto was all for keeping me with him at least for that one night, offering to go on with me the following morning. He was keen to witness the effect of my sudden swoop down upon the peaceful household of Pomino. But I could not think of such a thing. I insisted on proceeding alone that very night and without more delay.

I took the eight o’clock train and in half an hour was at Miragno.

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