The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 3 – A mole saps our house

scritto da Pirandelloweb.com

In Italiano – Il fu Mattia Pascal

En Español – El difunto Matias Pascal

The Late Mattia Pascal
Chapter 3
A mole saps our house

I was a bit hasty in stating, a moment ago, that I knew my father. Ican hardly claim as much. He died when I was four years old. He went on a trip to Corsica in the coaster of which he was captain and owner, and never came back—a matter of typhus, I believe, which carried him off in three days at the untimely age of thirty-eight. Nevertheless he left his family well provided for—his wife, that is, and two boys: Mattia (I that was in my first life), and Roberto, my elder by a couple of years.

The old people of our village enjoy telling a story to the

effect that my father's wealth had a rather dubious origin (though I don't see why they continue to hold that up against him, since the property has long since passed from our hands). As they will have it, he got his money at a game of cards with the captain of an English tramp-steamer visiting Marseilles. The Englishman had taken on a cargo at some port in Sicily, a load of sulphur, it is specified, consigned to a merchant in Liverpool. (They know all the details, you see: Liverpool! Give them time to think and they'll tell you the name of the merchant and the street he lived on!) After losing to my father the large amount of cash he had on hand, the captain staked the sulphur—and again lost.
The steamer arrived in Liverpool still further lightened by the weight of its master, who had jumped overboard at sea in despair. (Had it not been so well ballasted with the lies of my father's defamers, I dare say the ship would never have reached port at all!)

Our fortune was mostly in landed property. An adventurer of a roving disposition, my father was utterly unable to tie himself down to a business in one place. With his boat we went around from harbor to harbor buying here and selling there, dealing in goods of every sort.
But to avoid the temptation of too hazardous speculations, he always invested his profits in fields and houses about our native town; intending, I suppose, to settle down there in his old age, and enjoy, with his wife and children about him, the fruits of his imagination and hard work.

He bought—oh, he bought a place called _Le Due Riviere_—"Shoreacres," as it were, for its olives and its mulberry trees; he bought a farm we called "The Coops," with a pond on it, which ran a mill; he bought the whole hillside of "The Spur"—the best vineyard in our district; he bought the San Rocchino estate, where he built a delightful summer-house; in town he bought the mansion where we lived, two tenement houses, and the building that has now been fixed over for the

armory.

His sudden death was the ruin of us. Utterly ignorant of business matters, my mother was obliged to entrust our fortune to someone. She chose as her steward a man who had been enriched by my father and who, as anyone would have thought, would be loyal out of sheer gratitude, if for nothing else; all the more since a high salary for his services would make honesty a good policy also. A saintly soul, my mother was! Naturally timid and retiring, as trustful as a child, she knew nothing at all about this world and the people who live in it. After my father's death her health was never good; but she did not complain of her troubles to other people; and I doubt whether she lamented them much in her secret heart. She seemed to take them as a natural consequence of her great sorrow. The shock of that should have killed her—so she reasoned. Ought she not be thankful therefore to the good Lord who had vouchsafed her a few years more of life—be it indeed in pain and suffering—to devote to her children?

For us she had an almost morbid tenderness, full of worries and fancied terrors. She would scarcely let us out of her sight, for fear of losing us. Let her look up from her work to find one of us absent, and the servants would be sent calling through the great mansion where we lived (the monument to my father's ambition) to bring us back to her side.

Merging her whole existence in that of her husband, she felt lost in the world when he was gone. She never left the house except on Sundays—and then only to attend early mass in a church near by, in company with two maids of long service with us whom she treated as members of the family. Indeed, to simplify her life still further, she lived in three rooms of our big house, abandoning the others to the haphazard care of the maids and to the pranks of us two boys.

I can still feel the impressiveness of those mysterious halls and chambers, all pretentiously furnished with massive

antiques. The faded tapestries and upholstering gave off that peculiar odor of mustiness which is the breath, as it were, of ages that have died. More than once, I remember, I would look around, in strange consternation, upon those weirdly silent objects which had been sitting there for years and years motionless and unused!

Among my mother's more frequent visitors was an aunt of mine on my father's side—Scolastica by name, a bilious, irritable old maid, tall, dark-skinned, stern of bearing, and with eyes like a ferret.
Scolastica never stayed long at any one time. Invariably her visits ended in a quarrel which she would settle by stalking out of the house, without saying goodbye to anyone, and slamming the doors behind her. I was terribly afraid of this redoubtable woman. I would sit in my chair without daring to stir, gazing at her with wide-opened eyes; especially when she would fly into a temper, turn furiously upon my mother, and stamping angrily on the floor, exclaim: "Do you hear that? Hollow, hollow, underneath! Ah, that mole! That mole!"

"That mole," was Battista Malagna, the man in charge of our property, who, according to Scolastica, was boring the ground away beneath our feet. My aunt, as I learned years later, wanted mother to marry again at all costs. Ordinarily, the relatives of a dead husband do not give advice like this. But Scolastica had a severe and spiteful sense of the fitness of things. Her desire to thwart a thief, rather than any real affection for us, moved her to protest against Malagna's robbing us with impunity. Since mother was blind to faults in anybody, Scolastica saw no possible remedy except bringing a new man into the house. And she had even picked her man—a poor devil, though a rich one, named Gerolamo Pomino.

Pomino was a widower with one boy. (The boy, also a Gerolamo, is still living; in fact he is a friend,—I can hardly say a relative—of mine, as my story will show in due season. In those days Gerolamino, or "Mino" as we called him, would come

to our house along with his father, to be the torment of brother Berto and me.)

Years before, Gerolamo Pomino the elder had long aspired to the hand of my aunt Scolastica; but she had spurned him as, for that matter, she had spurned every other offer in marriage. It was not so much her lack of an impulse to love. As she put it, the faintest suspicion on her part that a husband might betray her even in his thoughts would drive her to murder, yes, to murder downright! And who ever heard of a faithful husband? All males were hypocrites, deceivers, scalawags!

“Even Pomino?”

“Well, Pomino, no!”

One exception that proved the rule! But she had found that out too late. Carefully watching all the men who had proposed to her and then married someone else, she had found them, in every case, playing tricks on their wives—discoveries that afforded her a certain ferocious satisfaction. But Pomino had always been “straight.” In his case, the woman, rather, had been to blame.

“So why don’t you marry him, now, Cymanthia? Oh dear me! Just because he’s a widower? Just because there has been a woman in his life, and he may give her a thought now and then that might otherwise have been for you? That’s splitting things pretty fine! Besides, just look at him. You can see a mile away that he’s in love; and there’s no secret about who it is he wants, poor man!”

As though mother would ever have dreamed of a second marriage! A sacrilege that would have seemed in her eyes! I imagine that mother doubted, besides, whether Scolastica really meant everything she said; so when my aunt would start one of her long orations on the virtures of Pomino, mother would just laugh in her peculiar way. The widower was often present at

such arguments. And I can remember him hitching about uncomfortably on his chair as Scolastica would overwhelm him in words of extravagant praise, and trying to relieve his torture by the most wicked of his oaths: “The dear Lord save us!” (Pomino was a dapper little old man with soft blue eyes. Berto and I thought there was just a suggestion of rouge on his cheeks. Certainly he was proud of keeping his hair so late in life; and he took the greatest pains in parting and brushing it. As he talked, he was continually smoothing it with his two hands.)

I don’t know how things would have turned out, had mother—not for her own sake, surely, but as a safeguard for the future of her children—taken Aunt Scolastica’s advice and married Pomino. Surely nothing could have been worse than continuing with our affairs in the clutches of Malagna, “the mole.” By the time Berto and I were in long trousers, most of our inheritance had dwindled away; though something was still left—enough to keep us, if not in luxury, at least free from actual need. But we were careless youngsters, with not one serious thought in our heads. Instead of coming to the rescue of the remnants of our fortune, we persisted in the kind of life to which our mother had accustomed us as boys.

Never, for example, were we sent to school. We had a private tutor come to the house, a man called “Pinzone,” from the little pointed beard he wore. (His real name was Del Cinque; but everybody called him “Pinzone,” and I believe he grew so used to it that he ended bysigning his name that way himself.) He was an absurdly tall and an absurdly lean fellow; and there is no telling how much taller he might have grown, had, his head and neck not toppled forward from his shoul-ders in a stoop that became a real deformity. Another feature was an enormous Adam’s apple that went up and down as he swallowed. Pinzone was always biting at his lips as though chastising a sarcastic little smile peculiar to him; a smile which, banished from his lips, managed to escape through two sharp

eyes that ever showed a glittering mocking twinkle.

That pair of eyes must have seen many things in our house to which mother and we two boys were blind. But Pinzone said nothing, perhaps because it was not his place to interfere; or, as I believe more probable, because he took a vindictive pleasure in the thought of us boys being as poor as he some day. For Berto and I ragged him unmercifully. As a rule he would let us do anything we chose; but then again, as though to ease his conscience, he would tell on us at tunes when we least expected.

Once, I remember, mother had asked him to take us to Church. It was Easter time, and we were to prepare for Confession. Thence we were to call at Malagna's house, and express our sympathy to Signora Malagna who was ill. Not a very exciting program for two boys our age and in such fine weather! We were hardly out of mother's hearing when we proposed a revision of the day's work. We offered Pinzone a fine lunch with wine, provided he would forget Church and Mrs. Malagna and go birdsnesting with us in the woods. There was a gleam in his eye as he accepted. He ate our lunch and did not stint his appetite; making serious inroads on our allowance for the month. Then he joined us on our escapade, hunting with us for fully three hours, helping us to climb the trees and even going up himself. On our return home, mother asked after Mrs. Malagna, and questioned us about Confession. We were thinking up something to say, when Pinzone, with the most brazen face in the world, told the whole story of our day without omitting one detail.

The punishments we inflicted for this and similar treachery never won us a decisive armistice; though the tricks we played on him were not wanting in a certain devilish ingenuity. Just before supper time, for instance, Pinzone would wait for the bell by taking a little nap on the couch in our front hall. One evening, of a wash day, when we had been put to bed early for some prank or other, we got up, filled a squirtgun with

water from the wash, stealthily crept up to him, and let him have it full in the nostrils. The jump he gave took him nearly to the ceiling!

What we learned with such a teacher can readily be imagined; though it was not all his fault. Pinzone had a certain erudition, among the classic poets; and I, who was much more impressionable than Berto, managed to memorize a goodly number of verses—especially charades and the baroque poetry of old. I could recite so many of these that mother was convinced we were both progressing very well. Aunt Scolastiea, for her part, was not deceived; and she made up for the failure of her plans for Pomino, by trying to set Berto and me in order. We knew we had mother on our side, however, and paid no attention to her. So angry was she at this scorn of her interest in us that I am sure she would have given us both the thrashings of our lives had she been able ever to do so without mother's knowing. One day, when she was leaving the house in rage as usual, she happened to encounter me in one of the deserted rooms. I remember that she seized me by the chin and tightening her fingers till it hurt, she said: "Mamma's little darling! Mamma's little darling!"; then she lowered her face till her eyes were looking straight into mine; and a sort of stifled bellow escaped her: "If you were mine…. Oh, if you were mine….!"

I can't yet understand why she had it in for me especially. I was a model pupil for Pinzone, as compared with Berto. It may have been the rather innocent face for which I have always been noted; an innocence accentuated rather than not by the pair of big round glasses they had fitted to my nose to discipline one of my eyes which preferred to choose, independently of the other, the objects it would look at.

Those glasses were the plague of my life; and the moment I escaped from the authority of my elders, I threw them away, restoring a longed-for autonomy to the oppressed member. As I viewed the matter, I

was never destined to be a wonder for good looks, even with both eyes straight. Why go to all that trouble then? I was in good health! Never mind painting the lily! By the time I was eighteen, a red curly beard had come to monopolize most of my face, to the particular disadvantage of a mere dot of a nose which tended to lose its bearings somewhere between that fullsome thicket and the spacious clearing of a rather impressive brow. How comforting it would be if we could only choose noses to match our faces! Imagine a man with an enormous proboscis quite out of keeping with lean wizened features. To such a man I would have said: "Look here, friend, you have a nose that just suits me. Let's exchange! It will be to the advantage of both of us." For that matter I could have improved in the selection of many other parts of my physique; but I soon understood that any radical betterment was out of the question. I grew reconciled to the face the Lord gave me, and dismissed the matter from my mind.

Brother Roberto, on the contrary, was not so easily distracted. As compared with me, he was a handsome well-built lad; and unfortunately he knew it. He would spend hours in front of a mirror combing his hair and dandying up in every way. He invested a mint of money in neckties, linen and other articles of dress. On one occasion he angered me with the fuss he made over a new evening suit for which he had bought a white velvet waistcoat. To spite him, I put the thing on one morning and went hunting in it.

"The Mole" meantime was not idle. Every season Malagna would come around complaining of the bad crops and getting mother's consent to a new mortgage he was forced to take out. Now it would be repairs on a building; now additional drainage for a field; now the "extravagance of the boys." A visit from him meant the certain announcement of another catastrophe.

One year a frost (as he said) ruined our olive groves on the "Shoreacres"; then the philloxera destroyed our vineyards on "The Spur." To import American roots (immune from this plague

of the vines) we were obliged to sell one farm, and then a second, and then a third. Mother was sure that some day Malagna would find our pond at “The Coops” dried up! As for Berto and me, I suppose we did spend more money than was wise or necessary; but that does not alter the fact that Battista Malagna was the meanest swindler that ever disgraced the surface of this planet. Words more severe than these I could not charitably use toward a man who eventually became a relative of mine by marriage.

So long as mother was alive, Malagna allowed us to feel no discomforts. Indeed he put no limit to our caprices and expenditures. But that was just a blind to conceal the abyss into which, on my mother’s death, I alone was to be plunged.

I alone… because Berto was shrewd enough to make a profitable marriage in good season. Whereas my marriage….

“I ought to say something about my marriage, oughtn’t I, Don Eligio?”

Don Eligio is up on his ladder again, continuing his inventory. He looks around and calls back:

“Your marriage? Why of course! The idea! Avoiding everything improper, to be sure….”

“Improper! That’s a good one! You know very well that….”

Don Eligio laughs, and all this little deconsecrated church laughs with him…. Then he continues:

“If I were you, Signer Pascal, I’d take a peep at Boccaccio or Bandello, in passing…. That would sort of get you into the spirit of the thing….”

Don Eligio is always talking about the “spirit of the thing,” the tone, the flavor, the style…. Who does he think I am? D’Annunzio? Not if I can help it! I am putting the thing down just as it was; and it’s all I can do, at that. I was never

cut out to be a literary fellow…. But having once begun my story, I may as well continue, I suppose.

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

«««« Pirandello in English

The late Mattia Pascal – Index

- The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 18 – The late Mattia Pascal

Se vuoi contribuire, invia il tuo materiale, specificando se e come vuoi essere citato a **collabora@pirandelloweb.com**

Shakespeare Italia