

The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 4 – Just as it was

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

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



The Late Mattia Pascal Chapter 4 Just as it was

I was out hunting one day, when I came upon a scarecrow in an open field. A short pudgy figure it was, stuffed with straw, and with an iron pot inverted on the upright for a hat. I stopped, as a whimsical notion suddenly flitted through my head.

“I have met you before,” said I. “An old acquaintance!”

After a moment I burst out:

“Try the feel of this, Batty Malagna!”

A rusty pitchfork was lying on the ground nearby. I picked it

up and ran it into the belly of the "man"; with so much zest, moreover, that the pot was almost shaken from its perch!

Yes, Batty Malagna himself; the way he looked when sweating and puffing in a long coat and a stiff hat he went walking of an afternoon! Everything was loose, baggy, slouching about Batty Malagna.

His eyebrows seemed to ooze down his big fat face, just as his nose seemed to sag over an insipid mustache and goatee. His shoulders were a sort of drip from his neck, his abdomen a sort of downflow from his chest. This belly of his was balanced—precariously—on a pair of short stubby legs; and to make trousers that would fit these along with the paunch above, the tailor had to devise something extremely slack at the waist. From a distance Batty looked as though he were wearing skirts, or at least as though he were belly all the way down.

How Batty Malagna, with a face and a body like that, could be so much of a thief, I cannot imagine. I always supposed thieves had a distinctive something about their appearance or demeanor, which Batty seemed to lack. He walked with a waddle, his belly all a-shake, and his hands folded behind his back. When he talked, his voice was a kind of muffled bleat blubbering up with difficulty from the fat around his lungs. I should like really to know how he reconciled his conscience with the depredations he made upon our property! He must have had very deep and devious reasons, for it was not from lack of money that he stole. Perhaps he just had to be doing something out of the ordinary to make life interesting, poor devil.

Of one thing I am convinced: he must have suffered grievously, inside, from the lifelong affliction of a wife whose principal occupation was keeping him in his place. Batty made the mistake of choosing a woman from a social station just above his own (this was a very low one indeed.) Signora Guendolina, married to a man of her own sphere, would probably have made a passable helpmeet; but her sole service to Batty was to remind

him on every possible pretext and occasion that she was of a good family and that in her circles people did so and so. So and so, accordingly, Batty tried his best to do. No bumpkin ever set out to become a "gentleman" with more studious application. But what a job it was! How it made him sweat—in summer weather!

To make matters worse, my lady Guendolina, shortly after her marriage to Malagna, developed a stomach trouble which was destined to prove incurable; since entirely to master it required a sacrifice greater than her strength of will: abstinence, namely, from certain croquettes she knew how to make with truffles; from a number of peculiarly ingenious desserts; and, above all else, from wines. Not that she ever abused the latter! I should say not! Guendolina was a lady, and self control is a test of breeding! But a cure of the ailment in question demanded total avoidance of strong drink.

As youngsters, Berto and I were sometimes asked to stay to dinner at Malagna's house. Batty would sit down at table and pitch in, meanwhile lecturing his wife (with due regard for reprisals, of course) on the virtues of abstemiousness.

"I for my part," he would say (balancing a mouthful on his knife), "fail to see how the pleasure of tickling your palate with something you like to eat" (transferring the morsel to his mouth) "is worth buying at the price of a day in bed. There's no sense in it! I am sure that if I" (wiping his plate with a piece of bread) "gave way to my appetite like that, I should feel myself less of a man. Damn good, this sauce today, Guendolina. Think I'll try just a little more of it—just a spoonful, mind!"

"No, you shall not have another bit," his wife would snap back angrily. "The idea! I wish the Lord would give you one good cramp like those I have! That might teach you to have some regard for the woman you married!"

“Why, what in the world, Guendolina...? Some regard for you?”
(meanwhile pouring himself a glass of wine).

Guendolina would answer by rising from her place, snatching the glass from his hands and emptying it... out of the window.

“Why... what’s the matter? Why did you do that?”

“Because!” says Guendolina. “You know very well that wine is poison to me, poison! If you ever see me with a glass of wine—well—you just do what I did. You take it and throw it out of the window too!”

Sheepish, mortified, but making the best of it, Malagna would look first at me, then at Berto, then at the glass, then at the window.

“But, dearest, dearest, are you a child? You expect me to force you to be good? Oh, I say! You ought to be strongminded enough to control your little weaknesses.”

“While you sit there enjoying yourself! While you sit there smacking your lips, holding your glass up to the light, clinking it with your spoon—just to torment me? Well, I won’t stand it! That’s what I get for marrying a man of your antecedents!...”

Well, Malagna went so far as to give up wine, to please his wife and set her a good example! I leave it to you: a man who would do that is likely to steal, just to convince himself that he amounts to something.

However, it was not long before Batty discovered that his wife was drinking behind his back; as though wine consumed in that way would not do her any harm. Whereupon Batty took to wine again himself; but at the tavern, so as not to humiliate his Guendolina by showing that he had caught her cheating. And a man who would do that...!

Eventual compensation for this perennial affliction Batty

Malagna hoped to find in the advent of a male heir to his family. That would be an excuse, in his own eyes and in the eyes of anybody, for all his thievery from us. What may a man not do to provide a future for his children? But his wife, instead of getting better and better, got worse and worse. Perhaps he never mentioned this burning subject to her. There were so many reasons why he should not add that worry to her troubles. Ailing, almost an invalid in the first place! Then she might die if she tried to have a child! No: God forbid! Batty would be resigned! Each of us has a cross to bear in this world!

Was Malagna quite sincere in this considerateness? If so, his conduct did not show it when Guendolina died. To be sure, he mourned her loss! Oh yes, he wept till it seemed his heart would break! And he was so thoughtful of her memory that he refused to put another "lady" in the place which she had occupied. No, no, I should say not! And he might have, you know, he might have—man in his position in town, and with plenty of money by this time! No, he married—a peasant girl, the daughter of the farmer who worked one of our estates—strong healthy thing, good-natured, good housekeeper—so that everyone could see that what he wanted was children, and the right woman to bring them up. If he waited hardly till Guendolina was cold in her grave, that was reasonable, too. Batty was getting on in years, and had no time to waste.

I had known Oliva Salvoni well since I was a little boy and she a little girl. Daughter of Pietro Salvoni (the land he worked was the farm of ours which we called "The Coops"), she had been responsible for the many hopes I had aroused in poor mother in my time—hopes that I was about to settle down and take an interest in our property, even turn to farming which I had suddenly begun to like so well. Dear innocent mamma! It was, of course, my terrible Aunt Scolastica who shortly disabused her:

"But don't you see, stupid, that he's always hanging around Salvoni's?"

"Yes, why not? He's helping get the olives in!"

"Helping take an Olive in! One Olive, do you hear, cabbage-head!"

Mother gave me a scolding that she thought would last me a long long time: the mortal sin of leading a poor girl into temptation, of ruining an innocent creature I could never marry... that kind of talk, you understand. ...

I listened respectfully. Really there was not the slightest danger in the world. Oliva was quite able to take care of herself: and one of her charms lay precisely in the ease and independence born of this assurance, which enabled her to avoid insipid reticences and affected modesty. How she could laugh! Such lips as hers I have never seen before nor since. And what teeth! From the lips I got not the suggestion of a kiss; from the teeth—a bite once, when I had seized her by the wrists and refused to let her go short of a caress upon her hair! That was the sum total of our intimacy.

So this was the beauty (and such a youthful, fresh and thoroughly charming beauty!) that Malagna took to wife. Oh yes, I know... but a girl can't turn her back on certain opportunities! She knew very well where that rascal got his money. One day, indeed, she told me exactly what she thought of him for doing it. Then later on, because of that very money, she married him... However, one year, two years, went by—and Malag-na's heir was still wanting.

During the period of his first marriage Malagna had put all the blame on Guendolina and her stomach trouble; but not even now did he emotely suspect that the fault might be his own. He began to scowl and sulk at Oliva.

"Nothing?"

“Nothing!”

From the end of the third year his reproaches became quite undisguised. Soon he was actually abusing her, shouting and making scenes about the house, and claiming that she had made a show of her good health and good looks, to swindle him—a plain downright swindle, yes sir! What had he married her for! A woman of her class! Putting her in the place a lady—a real lady, sir—had held!—And if it hadn’t been for that one thing, do you suppose he would ever have thought of doing such a slight to the memory of the distinguished “lady” who had been his first wife?

Poor Oliva said nothing, not knowing what there was to say, in fact. She just came to our house to tell my mother all about it; and mother would comfort her as best she could, assuring her there was still some hope, since Oliva was a mere slip of a girl....

“Twenty, about?”

“Twenty-two!”

Oh, why so downhearted then? Children came sometimes, ten, fifteen, twenty years after a woman’s marriage! And her husband? Malagna was getting on in years, that was true; but....

Oliva, from the very first, had had her doubts, wondering whether...

well, how should she put it?... whether... it might not be his fault... there! But how prove a thing like that? Oliva was a woman of scruples. On marrying Malagna for his money and for nothing else she had determined to play absolutely fair with him... and she would not deceive him even for the sake of restoring peace to her household....

“How do you know all that?” asks Don Eligio.

“Huh! How do I know! I have just said that she came to our

house to discuss the matter with my mother. Before that I said I had known her all her life. Then, now, I could see her with my own eyes crying her heart out, all on account of that disgusting old thief! Finally. ...

Shall I say it right out, Don Eligio!" "Say it just as it was!"

"Well, she said no! That's putting it just as it was!"

Oh, I didn't mind being turned down so sharply. In those days I had, or thought I had—which amounts to the same thing—a great deal to occupy my mind and afford distractions. Money, in the first place; and money gives you, along with all the rest, certain ideas you would never have in the world except for money. The problem of spending I partly solved with the help of Gerolamo Pomino Second, who was a genius in that line and whom wise paternal restrictions always kept with pockets insufficiently lined.

"Mino" stuck to Berto and me like our shadows—now my shadow and now Berto's, that is. It was wonderful how Mino could change makeup according as it were I or Berto. When he hobnobbed with my brother, he became a regular dandy, and his father would loosen up a little on the purse-strings (for Gerolamo the elder had a weakness for "gentlemen"). But Berto did not find Mino so very congenial on the whole. As soon as he began to notice that Mino, his young worshipper, was imitating not only his clothes and his neckties but even the gait with which he walked, he would lose patience and finally say something that would drive the fellow away. Mino then would take up with me (and his father would duly draw the purse-strings tight again).

I was more tractable with people than brother Berto. I could swallow Mino's adulation for the fun I got out of him. Then, after a time, I would be sorry; for, in my eagerness to show off in front of him, I would almost always go a bit too far in getting Mino into scrapes of which I would be bound to share

the consequences.

Well, one day, while Mino and I were out hunting, I began to gossip about how Malagna was carrying on with his wife. In the course of our conversation it developed that Mino had long had his eye on a girl, who happened to be the daughter of one of Malagna's cousins! The miss herself seemed not to be disinclined toward him; but for all of that he had never yet been able to exchange two words with her.

"I bet you never had the pluck to try," I offered jestingly. Mino averred he had; but I thought he blushed too much in saying so. "I did have a talk with their maid," he added. "And what I learned from her would make you laugh! Why, according to the maid, old Malagna is down there all the time, these days, and he seems to be trying to cook up something, with the connivance of the mother. She is an own cousin of his, and a pretty poor sort, I take it..."

"What is he trying to pull off?"

"Why, it seems that when Malagna's first wife died, this old witch—she's a widow named Pescatore!—got the idea of saddling her daughter off on him. Batty married Oliva of course. Well, the Pescatore woman called him everything she could put her tongue to—fool, thief, traitor to his own blood, and so on; and she even gave her daughter a thrashing because the girl had not exerted herself enough to catch the old fool's eye. Now recently Batty has been going down there crying calamity because he has had no son to leave his money to. 'Serves you right!' says the old lady—for not having taken her daughter of course. Who knows what scheme she may now be working up?"

To tell the truth, I was sincere in the horror with which I put my hands to my ears and bade Mino say no more. In those days I liked to pose as a rounder of experience: but at bottom I was as innocent as a child. Nevertheless, from my knowledge

of the quarrels that had raged and were still raging between the Malagnas, man and wife, I thought there might be some fire behind the smoke that maid was raising. I made up my mind to try and discover the exact truth—to help Oliva out a little, if for nothing else. I asked Mino for the address of this cousin of Malagna. He gave it to me willingly, begging me, besides, to put in a good word for him if I ever met the girl. He also asked me to remember that she was his.

“Don’t worry!” I replied to this latter caution. “I won’t cut you out!”

It so happened that the very next morning, as mother told me, a note we had given was falling due, and I used that occasion for rooting Malagna out in the Pescatore cottage. “With a purpose in view, I covered the whole distance on the run, and broke, panting and perspiring, into the house:

“Malagna, the note... the note...!”

If I had not known already that this rascal’s conscience was not so very clean I would have suspected as much that day from the utter consternation in which he rose, pale, stammering, aghast, to his feet:

“Wh-wh-what n-note!”

“Why, the money we owe to So-and-So... Mother is worried to death!...”

Batty Malagna sank into his chair again with an “ah” of relief that gave the measure of the terror that had seized on him:

“All arranged! All arranged! My, how you scared me!... I renewed it, of course... for three months ... paying the interest—a lot of money... You mean to say you ran all the way down here just for that?...”

He was good-humored now, and he laughed and laughed, his great belly shaking up and down. He offered me a chair and

introduced me to the ladies:

“Mattia Pascal. My cousin, Marianna Dondi-Pescatore. Romilda, her daughter,—I call her my ‘niece.’”

Then he insisted that I take a drink of something to cool off after my long and ridiculous run....

“Romilda, would you mind... just a little something?”

“Evidently feels himself at home!” I commented to myself.

Romilda rose, looked with a quick glance of inquiry at her mother, left the room, and presently returned with a glass and a bottle of vermouth on a tray. Whereupon the widow snapped impatiently:

“No, no! Not that! Here, I’d better do it myself!” She took the tray away from Romilda and hurried into the pantry. When she came back, it was a different tray, a brand new red enameled one, with a magnificent cordial set—a silver-plated elephant, with a bottle of _rosolio_ on the crupper, and a dozen little glasses hanging loosely in a rack and tinkling as she walked.

I should have preferred the vermouth; but I accepted the _rosolio_. Malagna and the widow took some too. Romilda declined.

I did not stay long, that first time, in order to have a pretext for coming back again. I excused myself by saying that mother would be uneasy about the note; so I had better return another day to enjoy a longer chat with the two ladies.

From her manner of offering me her cold, bony, withered hand, I judged that Signora Marianna Dondi-Pescatore was not particular about having me call again. She bowed very stiffly and said nothing. But I was more than repaid by the smile of cordial interest Romilda gave me, with a glance, soft and at the same time sorrowful, which drew my attention to her eyes

again. I had noticed them when I first came in: quite unusual eyes, a strange dark green shaded by wonderfully long lashes—eyes of night, set like jewels between two waves of ebony black hair that made their way down over her temples and forehead as though to set off the luminous whiteness of her skin.

The house was quite plainly furnished; but already among the original pieces a few new-comers were conspicuous from their pretentious and over-ornamented elegance. Two large lamps of expensive

earthenware—still unused apparently—with globes of ground glass in fantastic design, sat on a very ramshackle dresser which had a discolored marble top and a round mirror rising from the back. In front of a sofa that had seen better days long since was a tea table, with gilded legs and a top painted in lurid colors. A cabinet against the wall was a valuable antique in Japanese lacquer. I noticed a glitter of satisfaction in Malagna's eyes as they rested on these gaudy objects, a look I had observed also when the cordial set came into the room.

On the walls was a profusion of old and not intolerable prints, some of which Malagna insisted that I admire. They were the work, he said, of Francesco Antonio Pescatore, his cousin, an engraver of great talent who died (as he added, in a whisper) in a lunatic asylum at Turin.

“Here is a picture of him,” Batty continued. “He drew it himself in front of a mirror!”

I had been studying Romilda all the while, and on comparing her with her mother, I had concluded: “No, she must take after her father instead.” With the picture of the man before me now, I did not know what to say. It is not fair, I suppose, to venture libelous guesses as to the integrity of Marianna Dondi; though I know she was a woman capable of anything. But that picture showed her husband as a very handsome man. How

could he ever have fallen in love with such an ugly harpy as she was? To do a thing like that he must have been a very loony lunatic indeed!

My impressions of that first visit I faithfully reported to Mino, speaking of Romilda with such warmth of admiration that his distant interest in the girl flared up at once into a passion. He was delighted that I had found her so charming and that his choice had my wholehearted approbation.

“So what are your intentions?” I asked. The widow, I agreed with him, was not a person to inspire confidence; but I was ready to stake my oath on the virtue of the daughter. There could be no doubt, either, as to the miserable designs of Malagna. The girl should be rescued therefore at any cost and without loss of time.

“But how?” asked Gerolamino, hanging breathless upon my every word.

“That’s the question!” said I. “First of all we must be sure about a number of things, keep our eyes open, study the terrain. I can’t say how right off, in so many words, but we’ll see. Give me a free hand, meantime; and I’ll pull you through. I’m getting interested in this affair! It’s exciting!”

Pomino noticed a certain undertone in my voice that worried him.

“Well, but... why... you say I ought to marry her?”

“I’m not saying anything, just yet. But would you be afraid to?”

“No, I’m not afraid... why do you ask?”

“Why, you seem to be going a bit too fast. Slow up a little now, and use your head. Supposing we discover beyond reasonable doubt that she is quite all she ought to be—a good

girl, virtuous, well-mannered, pure (no need to mention her looks: she's a queen—and you love her, don't you?);—well, supposing also we find that, through the viciousness of her mother and that other scoundrel, she is exposed to a very grave danger—to a vulgar criminal bargain that will leave her disgraced forever: would you shrink from facing the situation like a man? Would you refuse to do an act as meritorious as it is holy?"

"No-o-o! No-o!" stammered Pomino. "I wouldn't! But how about father?"

"Think he would object? I doubt it! Why should he? On account of the dowry, perhaps? Surely on no other ground! She's the daughter of an artist, you see, an engraver of great talent, who died in a... well, anyhow... who died in Turin. But your father is rich, and he has only you to provide for: you will be satisfied, so why should he care? And then besides, in case you can't bring him around by persuasion, there's nothing to be afraid of... You disappear with the girl some day; and everything is arranged! Land's sake, Pomino, you wouldn't let a little thing like a father stop you?"

Pomino laughed; and I proceeded to show him, two times two are four, that he had been born a husband much as some men are born poets. I painted the joys and consolations of married life with a jolly little girl like Romilda—the tenderness and adoration she would have for a brave man like Mino... her saviour.

"For the moment," I concluded, "you must find a way to attract her attention, get a word to her somehow, perhaps drop her a line. Imagine the state of mind the poor thing must be in now... a fly caught in a spider's web. A letter from you might be the chip that would save her from drowning. My job will be to stand watch. I'll hang around the house and see what I can do. At the first good chance, I'll introduce you. That's good sense, isn't it?"

“Very good!” said Pomino.

Now just why was I so anxious to get Romilda married? There was no reason whatever that I should be. As I said, I always liked to show off before Pomino. Once I started talking, I kept on, all the difficulties vanishing. I was inclined, in general, to do things impulsively and thoughtlessly. Perhaps that was one of the things for which the girls liked me in spite of my cock-eye and my rather ungainly physique. But in this ease there was something else besides.

My little intrigue gathered zest for me from the prospect of checkmating that ridiculous old satyr in one of his infamous designs—of beating him at his own game and making a fool of him. Finally came a sincere pity for Oliva; and the hope of doing just a little something for that other girl who had really made a deep impression on me.

Now I must appeal to you again. Was it my fault if Pomino proved to be a rabbit when it came to executing schemes of mine that required courage and decision? Was it my fault if Romilda fell in love with me instead of falling in love with him (I always praised him to the very skies!)? Was it my fault, finally, if that devilish widow Pescatore was shrewd enough to make me believe that I had skillfully exorcized the diffidence in her, and even, by my jokes, performed the miracle of bringing a laugh to hard thin lips which had never before been known to smile? I saw her gradually change toward me. I saw that my visits were at last welcome. I concluded that with a young man frequenting her house, a young man who was rich (I still thought I was rich, you see) and who gave every indication of being in love with her daughter, she had finally abandoned her iniquitous idea—if such an idea had ever entered her head (I was so far taken in that I actually began to doubt this latter).

Of course, I should have paid more attention to two facts—surprising when you think of them: first, that I never again found Malagna at her house; and second that she would

receive me only during the forenoon. But how could I tell at just that time that those particular facts were significant? Natural enough, wasn't it, to ask me to come early in the day (I was always proposing walks in the woods and fields, which are more agreeable when the sun is not too high)? Then again I had fallen in love with Romilda myself—though I was always pleading: the cause of. Pomino. I loved her with a wild impetuous passion—her dark green eyes under the long lashes, her nose, her lips, her cheeks, her everything—even a mole she had on the back of her neck and an almost invisible scar on one of her hands—hands that I kissed and kissed and kissed with the abandonment of a lost soul—all in the name of Pomino, to be sure.

And yet, probably nothing serious would ever have come of it, had not Romilda, one day (we were picnicing at "The Coops" and her mother was inspecting the old mill-wheel a safe distance away), suddenly lost the laughter with which she greeted my standing jokes about Pomino, burst into tears, and thrown her arms about my neck, begging me in the utmost distress to have pity on her.

"Oh take me away with you somewhere, Mattia," she cried, "take me away... away way off where I shall never see mother, or the house, or Malagna, or anybody else again! Take me away, today, this afternoon!"

Take her away? How could I take her away? And why?

It is true that for some days thereafter, still under the spell of her mad abandonment, I was thinking, with my usual determination also, of doing the right thing by her. I began preparing mother gradually for the news of my approaching marriage—a marriage I could no longer in any decency avoid. When, lo and behold, like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, I get a short and polite note from Romilda, requesting me to cease my attentions to her, to refrain from any further visits at her house, and to regard our friendship as ended for good

and all.

“So that’s that! What can have happened, I wonder?”

When, lo and behold again, who should come running over to our house but Oliva, sobbing and taking on, as though the world were coming to an end. The most unhappy woman the Lord ever made! House and home destroyed beyond repair! Nothing more for her to live for... Her “man” had secured the proof at last—proof that it was not his fault but hers! He had just come in and made the announcement triumphantly!

I was present while Oliva told her story. How I held my tongue I do not know—regard for mother’s feelings, more than anything else, perhaps. But I do know that I left the room with my hands to my head, shut myself up in my study, and, sick at heart, began to ask myself how Romilda, after what had occurred between her and me, could lend herself to such a despicable ruse. A true daughter of her mother, that she was! Look! Not only had they tricked that old idiot Malagna—a trick too mean to play even on a thief; but they had made a fool of me, of me, of me! And not only the mother! Romilda, too, had used me for her own vile ends... to get money from another man who was robbing me! And poor Oliva, meantime... publicly disgraced, her happiness and reputation gone forever!

I raged in my room there the greater part of the day; but toward evening I could stand it no longer. I went out and, with Romilda ‘a letter in my pocket, made for Oliva’s house.

I found the poor girl packing her things and about to go back to her father’s. She had never as yet breathed a word to old Salvoni of all she had had to put up with from Malagna.

“How can I think of living with him any longer,” she moaned. “No, it’s all over! If only he had taken up with a different girl... then perhaps...”

“So you know who it is then?” I interrupted.

In answer she covered her face with her hands and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed:

“What a girl!” she finally exclaimed raising her arms above her head.

“What a girl! And her mother! Her own mother! Together, understand?”

“You are not telling me anything I don’t know,” I now burst out.

“Here! Just have a look at this!”

I handed her the letter. Oliva stared at it blankly for a moment; then she took it from me and asked:

“A letter? What about?”

Oliva had never been to school, and she read with difficulty. Her eyes seemed to beg me to spare her the effort of deciphering all those words at that moment of her supreme anguish.

“Read!” I insisted.

She wiped her eyes, unfolded the letter, and spelled the words out one by one, whispering them to me syllable by syllable. After a line or two, she turned the page and looked at the signature. Then she looked at me, her eyes bulging from their sockets:

“You?” she gasped.

“Here,” I answered, “let me read it aloud to you! I’ll begin at the beginning.”

But she clasped the letter to her breast, to keep it from me:

“No,” she screamed, “this is mine, mine! I can use this letter!”

I smiled bitterly:

“How can you use it? You might show it to him? But, my poor girl, there isn’t a word in the whole letter that would lead your husband to disbelieve something that he is only too anxious to believe? They’ve made him swallow it, bait, hook, and line!”

“Ah yes, that’s so! That’s so!” Oliva groaned. “And do you know what he did? He came and told me never to dare, for the life of me, to breathe one word against the good name of that niece of his!”

“Why, exactly! So you see!” I answered. “You would gain nothing by telling him the truth. That is the very last thing you should try to do. Your game rather is to reassure him, keep Mm thinking it is as he thinks it is... Don’t you agree?”

What in the world could have happened (a month later, more or less) that Malagna should one day give his wife a terrible beating, and then, his mouth still frothing, come storming into our front room demanding that I “make good” for the dishonor I had brought upon an innocent girl—his niece? His niece, if you please, the niece of my father’s best friend, and a poor orphan, a poor orphan with no one to protect her. When he cooled off enough to talk a little more intelligibly he added that, for his part, he would have preferred to keep the matter quiet—he had no children of his own, you see; and he had made up his mind to take the baby, when it came, and bring it up as his own. But now, since the good Lord had been so merciful as to give him a legitimate child by ‘his own wife_, he couldn’t—he really couldn’t in justice to his future heir—adopt another’s offspring to take the rightful place of his firstborn.

“It’s Mattia’s work!” he began storming again, “Mattia must provide! And he must see to it at once—at once, do you hear! I am not going to waste any words. I’m going to be obeyed, or something will happen here that this town won’t forget in a hurry!”

Now supposing we stop to consider a moment, at this point in my story. I've been through a good deal in the course of my checkered career. To have my reader think me a fool, or even worse than that, would not hurt my feelings so very much. As I said, I am a person quite beyond this life, and nothing matters to me now. I suggest that we stop and think a moment, not out of vanity, therefore, but just to keep things straight.

It must be fairly evident that Romilda could have done nothing really wrong so far as tricking her "uncle" is concerned. Otherwise, why should Malagna have beaten his wife for her infidelity, and denounced me to my mother for ruining his niece? Romilda claims, in fact, that shortly after our visit to "The Coops," she made known to her mother the situation that bound her to me inseparably. But the old lady flew into a passion and averred that, under no conditions whatsoever would she allow her daughter, Romilda, to marry a good-for-nothing who would soon be losing the last cent to his name and be a beggar sleeping in the gutter. Now, since Romilda, quite of her own accord, had brought upon herself the greatest misfortune that can happen to a girl, there was nothing left for Signora Pescatore—as a prudent mother—to do, except to find the best possible solution to such a difficulty. What this solution was I need not say. When Malagna came at his usual hour, the mother found an excuse to withdraw, leaving Romilda alone with her uncle. Then Romilda, weeping "hot tears" as she says, threw herself at his feet, told him the plight she was in and hinted at what her mother was asking her to do. She begged him to use his in-fluence to bring her mother to a more reasonable and honorable frame of mind; since she belonged already to another man to whom she was determined to remain faithful.

Malagna was touched by her story—touched the way a man like him could be touched. He reminded her that she was not yet of age and accordingly was still under her mother's control—the

mother having the power to take legal action against me if she felt so inclined. He, for his part, so he said, could not, in all conscience recommend a man like me to any girl for a husband—libertine, waster, loafer that I was. She, Romilda, therefore should hold herself ready to make some sacrifice of her emotions to her mother's very just displeasure; and such conduct might in the end be to her very great advantage. He, for instance, might find a way—well yes—if everything were kept absolutely quiet—to provide for the child that was to come, become its father—exactly, yes, its father—since he had no children of his own—and for years and years he had so longed to have an heir!...

Tell me now in all seriousness: could anybody be more square, more honest, more upright than that? Here's the point: all he had stolen from the real father (from me, that is) he would pass back by settling it on the future child: Was he to blame if I, ungrateful scamp, thereafter went and broke the eggs in his other basket? One, ail right! But two? No sir! Two was too much!

Too much, I suppose, because, as Malagna probably figured it out, my brother Roberto had contracted a very advantageous marriage, and there was no need to bother about the money that had been stolen from him...

So you see: having once fallen into the hands of these square, upright, and honest people, I was responsible for all the wrong that had been done. What more natural, therefore, than that I should take the consequences?

At first I stood my ground, refusing angrily. But my mother already could foresee the ruin that was shortly to overtake us. She saw in my marriage to Romilda—a relative of the man who had our money—a possible avenue of escape for me. So I gave in. The wedding took place.

But over my future with my young—and beautiful—wife, lowered

the menacing, wrathful, vindictive shadow of Signora Marianna Dondi-Pescatore, unwillingly the mother-in-law of a beggar like me!

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