The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 5 – How I was ripened

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In Italiano – Il fu Mattia Pascal

En Español – El difunto Matias Pascal

The Late Mattia Pascal
Chapter 5
How I was ripened

The old witch simply could not swallow it.

“What have you gained, what have you gained?” she would ask., “You weren’t satisfied to sneak into my house like a thief, seduce my daughter, and cover her with shame? That wasn’t enough for you, was it!”

“No, mother dear,” I would answer, “for if I had stopped there, I would have been guilty of doing something likely to please you!”

“Do you hear?” she would then shout at her daughter. “Do you hear? He is proud of it, actually proud of it! He dares to

brag about what he went and did with that…" – and at this point a torrent of abuse upon Oliva. Then with the backs of her hands clamped upon her hips and her elbows thrown far forward, she would end: "But, I say, what have you gained by it? You've ruined your own son, that's what you've gained…. He won't get a cent of the money…. Oh yes… of course…" (turning to Romilda again) "of course… what does he care?… That other one is his too…."

She never failed to use this final thrust in any of her attacks upon me, knowing well the effect it had upon my wife. Romilda surely had a reason to be jealous of the child who would be born to Oliva – in ease, and luxury, a silver spoon in its mouth; while hers would come into the world in poverty, its future ill-secured, the passions of domestic hatred seething around it. And this bleeding soreness in her heart was not relieved by the talk that well-intentioned gossips brought her of how happy "Aunt Malagna" was at the blessing the Lord had finally bestowed upon her…. Yes, Oliva was getting to be as pretty as a picture… fresh, rosy, blossoming, never so well, never so prosperous…. Whereas Romilda … well, there she was, huddled on a miserable sofa, pale, wasted, underfed, without one bright prospect to comfort her, without a single cheerful thought, without the energy to speak or the strength to open her eyes….

This too my fault? So it seemed! – She could no longer bear the sight of me nor the sound of my voice. And it was worse still when, to save from foreclosure the last piece of rented property we owned – "The Coops" and the old mill – we had to sell the Pascal mansion itself. That obliged my mother to come and live with us.

Letting our house go, for that matter, did not help at all. The approaching birth of an heir put Malagna in a position to break every leash of scruple that had hitherto restrained him. He came to an understanding with our creditors and, through a dummy purchaser, bought in our property for a song. What the

auction realized in cash was not enough to cover the mortgage on “The Coops” alone. Our creditors brought insolvency upon us and the court appointed a receiver to manage our affairs.

What was I now to do? Hopelessly I began looking around for work, any sort of work that would provide for the most elementary needs of my family. Untrained, uneducated, with the reputation my recent escapades and my longstanding shiftlessness had fastened upon me, I found it difficult to interest anyone in giving me a job. Then the scenes I was compelled to endure at home deprived me of a peace of mind essential for calm consideration of the possible chances that lay open to me.

Words cannot describe my feelings at seeing my own mother there in forced contact with the Pescatora woman. The dear old lady, too good for this world, aware at last — too crushingly aware — of the mistakes she had been making through her unwillingness to believe in the evil men can do (for these mistakes I never held her to account in my own heart), kept quite to herself, sitting day in day out in a corner of our living room, her hands in her lap, her head lowered, as though she were never sure she had a right to be there, as though, at almost any moment, she might be called upon to leave (and, for that matter, would be glad to leave). How could her presence have been a nuisance to anyone? Every now and then she would look up at Romilda and smile pitifully: but she dared make no advances beyond that. Once during her first days with us she had run to do some little thing for the poor girl; but my mother-in-law had shoved her rudely aside:

“Don’t you bother! This child is mine! I know what she wants!”

Romilda was very ill at the moment; and, in view of that, I said nothing. But thereafter I was on the watch to see that no disrespect was offered my wretched mamma. Soon I observed that this surveillance was a source of galling irritation to the widow and even to Romilda; and I was alarmed lest my absence

from the house at any time furnish occasion for them to vent their spite upon her. In such a case, I knew my mother would never say a word to me. Imagine my uneasiness, then, whenever I was away! And on returning I could never refrain from studying her face to see if she had wept. She would answer my gaze with a tender smile:

“Why do you look at me like that, Mattia?”

“Are you all right, mamma?”
She would lift a hand slightly:

“Don’t you see I am all right? Go to Romilda now I The poor thing is lonely and in pain!”

I decided finally to write to brother Berto, who was living at Oneglia. In asking him to take mamma to live with him, I made him understand that it was not to ease myself of a burden I was only too glad to carry even in the squalor in which I was then living, but just to make life bearable for her. Berto answered that he could not possibly. Our financial disaster had left him in a very painful position toward his wife’s family and toward that lady herself. He was living on her dowry now, and could not think of asking her to assume the support of another person. But that was not the only difficulty. Mother would be in the same fix with him as she was with me; for he too was staying with his mother-in-law — good enough woman, to be sure; but there would soon be trouble if our mother came. Who ever heard of two mothers-in-law getting along together in the same house? There were positive advantages also in keeping mamma with me. She would thus be spending her last years in the town where she had always lived; and not be called upon to adapt herself to new people and new ways. What pained him most was his inability to send me even a little money — since every penny he spent he had to beg from his wife.

I was careful not to show this letter to my mother; though I

dare say that had my desperate circumstances at the moment not blinded my calmer judgment, I should not have found it so utterly despicable as itseemed to me then. I have always had the happy – or unhappy – faculty of seeing both sides of every question. I would normally have reasoned that if, let us say, you steal the tail-feathers of a nightingale, the poor bird can still sing; but strip them from a peacock, and what can the peacock do? Eoberto had, with careful thought I do not doubt, worked out a balanced scheme of life whereby he could live comfortably and even with a certain dignity on his wife's income. To disturb that balance would have meant for him an untold, an irreparable, sacrifice. An agreeable address, good manners, a not inelegant pose as a gentleman of breeding – all these Eoberto had – they were all he had – to give his wife. To be able conscientiously to lay the burden of our mother upon her, he would have had to offer just a bit of real affection, too. In making brother Berto, God had endowed him with many things; but heart was not one of them. With this important member lacking, poor Berto was a hopeless case!

So things went from bad to worse with us; and I could find no help for it. A few odds and ends, among our personal belongings, had survived the wreck of our fortune; and these kept us going for a time. But when my mother sold the last trinkets my father had given her (sacred memories they bore!), the Pescatore woman saw the time approaching when we would fall back upon the miserable income of forty lire a month that belonged to her. She became more hateful and ferocious from day to day. I could see that the storm I had forestalled so long was now about to break – and all the more violently from its long repression, as well as from the very humility with which mamma was accepting it all. I would pace nervously up and down the room, with the widow's flaming eyes upon me. When I felt the atmosphere growing too tense, I would go out of doors, to avoid all pretext for an outburst. Then I would begin to fear for mamma, and hurry back again.

One day I stayed away a second too long. The cyclone came at last, and on the most trivial of provocations – a visit from the two old servants who had worked for years in our former home. One of them had put nothing aside in her long service with us, so she had accepted work with another family. But our old Margherita, alone in the world, and of a saving disposition, had stored away a quite respectable sum against her declining days. It seems that mamma ventured to express some of her real feelings to these two companions of her whole married life; but, quite apart from that, Margherita had perceived at a glance the strained situation in our new home.

“Oh do come and live with me!” she had proffered In the goodness of her heart. “I have two nice bright rooms, with a porch looking toward the water…. And you ought to see the flowers in my window box!”

Yes, there the two of them could finish their days together in the affection and devotion that had united them for years!

Mother, of course – what else could she say? – declined; and this refusal was enough to throw the widow Pescatore into spasms. “When I walked into the house I found her shaking her fists in Margherita’s face, while our old servant was standing her ground and holding her assailant off as best she could. Mamma, weeping, moaning, trembling like a leaf, was clinging to the other maid as though begging for protection. I lost control of myself completely. Dashing upon my mother-in-law, I seized her by her two wrists and threw her back with all my might. She slipped on the floor and fell. Up again in a flash, she came back at me like a tigress; stopping, however, before her fangs quite reached my face.

“Out of my house!” she shouted, gasping for breath in her rage. “You – and that mother of yours! Out of my house with you! Out of my house!”

“Listen!” I said, calmly, though my voice may have trembled

from the effort I was making to restrain myself; “Listen! Mamma and I are not going to stir! You are the one who had better be going. In fact, I should go right now if I were you. Don’t you dare get me any madder than I am! There’s the door! And you know the road!”

Romilda meantime had been lying on the sofa, too ill to sit up. But now, screaming and weeping hysterically, she leapt to her feet and threw herself into her mother’s arms.

“Oh no, mamma! Don’t leave me here! Don’t leave me here all alone with these people!”

“You wanted him! You wanted him! And now you’ve got him, the worthless beggar! I shall not stay under the same roof with him another second!”

She did not go, of course. But two days later another hurricane blew into the house. My Aunt Scolastica, having heard the story from Margherita, I suppose, swept in upon us in her usual breezy style. The scene that followed would be a success on any stage.

That morning, my wife’s mother was making bread in our kitchen-living room, her sleeves rolled up to her elbows and her skirt caught up around her waist to keep it clean. Barely turning her head as Aunt Scolastica came in, she went on sifting her flour and kneading her dough as coolly as could be. Auntie did not notice the slight. She had opened the door without a knock or a good-day and gone straight to mamma, as though my mother were the only person present in the room.

“Here,” she began, “get into your things. I’m going to take you home with me. You could hear the noise ten miles away! So here I am. Come, step lively! Wrap up your duds, and we’re off!”

These phrases came out in short sharp explosions. The end of her long nose, hooked like a beak to her dark bilious face,

kept going up and down from the excitement suppressed within her. There was a wicked glare in her beady ferret-like eyes.

Not a word meantime from the bread-board! The widow Pescatore had wet her dough and moulded it into a heavy round mass which she kept picking up and thumping down on the board, each thump giving an answer to an ejaculation from my aunt. Scolastica noticed the rhythm, and said a few more things. Thump: “Yes, indeed!” Thump: “I should say so!” Thump: “Oh really!” Thump: “You don’t say!” Finally my mother-in-law reached for the rolling-pin and laid it down on the edge of the board, with a thump that meant: “And I’ve got this too, you see!”

This was the spark that touched off the magazine. Aunt Scolastiea jumped to her feet, tore a shawl from her shoulders, and tossed it spitefully at my mother:

“Put that on – never mind your other rags – and start yourself out of here!”

Then she marched over to the bread-board and confronted the widow Pescatore. The latter drew back a step, picking up the rolling-pin. Scolastiea turned to the bread-board, gathered up the heavy, sticky mess of dough in her two hands and brought it down upon the woman’s head. My mother-in-law was no match for this super-harpy. Pushing her into a corner, Aunt Scolastiea plastered the dough down over the poor woman’s face, working it into her eyes, her nose, her mouth, her hair – and wherever the paste touched, it caught for good. Then she seized mamma by the arm and dragged her out through the door.

What followed was for my exclusive benefit. Handful by handful the Pescatore woman loosened the dough from her face and threw it at me as I sat there doubled up with laughter in a corner. Then she rushed upon me, pulled my beard, scratched my face, kicked my shins, and finally, in a paroxysm of rage, threw herself to the floor, where she lay rolling round and round kicking in all directions. Poor Romilda, in the next room was

– sit venia verbo – vomiting with loud gags of pain.

“Why mother, shame on you!” I called to the heap of humanity squirming on the floor. “You are showing your legs! You are showing your legs! For shame!”

* * *

I have been able since that morning to laugh at every misfortune, big or little, that has ever overtaken me. At that moment I saw myself a villain in the most comic tragedy ever enacted on this earth: my mother in flight with that crazy aunt of mine; my wife in the next room in the condition I described; Marianna Pescatore there on the floor gesturing with her legs… while I, I sat there doubled up in my corner, I, a down-and-out, a man with no visible resources for his next day of life, with my beard and clothing sticky with dough, my face scratched, bruised, and dripping I could not say whether with blood, or with tears from too much laughing.

To decide this latter point I went over to the mirror. It was tears! But I had been well clawed up too. And my eye, my famous crooked eye! That unruly member was more than ever bent on looking where it chose. “Good for you!” I apostrophized; “you at least are without a boss!” I reached for my hat and ran out of the house, determined not to set foot in it again till I had found the means for supporting, in a poor way at least, my wife, myself, and my future child.

The spiteful contempt I now felt for myself over my reckless squandering of so many years made me understand that my present plight would bring me ridicule rather than pity from any one I might appeal to. Certainly I deserved every bit of my misfortune. Only one person in the world had any reason to feel the slightest sympathy for me – the man who had pillaged my inheritance. But how eager Batty Malagna would be to rush to my assistance after what had taken place between him and me!

No! Succor came, when it came, from a quarter where I should never have dreamed of looking for it.

I wandered aimlessly about town all that day; and it was getting dark when by the merest chance I came upon Gerolamo Pomino, Second. Mino saw me first; and, with the idea of avoiding me, turned about and hurried off in the other direction.

“Pomino,” I called after him. “Pomino!”

“What do you want?” he said, turning sullenly in his tracks. He did not raise his eyes, as I came up to him.

“Why, Pomino, old man,” I said, slapping him on the back and laughing in real amusement at his long face; “You aren’t angry at me — honestly?”

Oh the ingratitude of men! Pomino was angry at me, in fact very angry at me — for double-crossing him, as he claimed, in the matter of the girl. And I could not at once convince him that if there had been any treason, I was the one who had most right to complain; that he ought, in fact, to lie down on the ground right there and kiss my boots in thankfulness.

I was still bubbling with the bitter over-exhilarated gaiety which had come upon me at the sight of my face in the mirror:

“See these scratches?” I said to him at a certain point. “I got them from her?”

“From Ro… from your wife, I mean?”

“Well — from her mother, at least!” And I told him why and how. He smiled but without much fervor. I suppose he was saying to himself that the widow Pescatore would not have treated him that way — he was not in quite my fix, financially; besides his general disposition was much better than mine. I was almost tempted to ask him why, if he felt so strongly about the whole affair, he had not married Romilda in

the first place as I had encouraged him to do, running away with the girl before I had been so unlucky as to fall in love with her myself. In the end all that had happened had happened because he was such an absurd ninny in a case where courage and decision were absolute essentials. However, I did not press that point. Instead I asked him simply:

“What are you doing to amuse yourself, these days?”

“Nothing!” he sighed dejectedly. “I’m bored to death! Nobody around to have any fun with!”

There was such a peevish dejection in the tone with which he pronounced these words, that I suddenly divined what was really the matter with him. To be sure Mino had been more or less worked up over Romilda; but it had not been that so much as the loss of his companionship with Berto and me. Berto had moved away; and Romilda had spoiled everything in my direction. With these two props of his existence gone, what was left for poor Pomino?

“No one to have any fun with? Why don’t you get married, man? That’s exciting enough! Look at me!”

Tragi-comically, he shook his head, closed his eyes, and raised his right hand for an oath:

“Never! Never! Never!”

“You’re a wise man, Pomino! Stick to that, and you’ll come out all right!… Meantime, you’re looking for Luigi Pirandello — The Late Mattia Pascal

company, and I am at your service — for an all-night spree, if you say so!”

I told him of the resolution I had made on leaving my house, coming eventually to the desperate situation in which I found myself as regards money.

“My dear old fellow…” said Pomino, offering me all he had.

But I refused. It was not that kind of help I needed. A few lire more or less, and the next day I would be as badly off as ever. No, what I wanted was a position, and a permanent one, if possible.

“Wait a moment,” exclaimed Pomino, his face brightening with an inspiration. “I have it!… You know about my father, don’t you? He’s working with this Administration….”

“I had not heard about that; but I can well imagine him in a good place!”

“He is. They’ve made him District Inspector of Education.”

“That, to tell the truth, does surprise me!”

“Well, I remember that last night at dinner…. Say, you know an old fellow by the name of Romitelli?”

“No!”

“Nonsense, of course you do! That old codger down at the Boccamazza Library! Deaf, and almost blind, to begin with. But now he’s broken down completely and they’ve retired him on a pension. My old man says the place is a wreck, and that unless something is done about it pretty soon, the books will all be ruined. Why isn’t that just the thing for you?”

“I? A librarian?” I exclaimed. “But that takes a man of education….”

“And why not you?” Pomino answered. “You know as much as Romitelli ever did!”

That was a sound argument in truth. Mino suggested that it might be better to approach his father through Aunt Scolastica, “who had always been on the right side of his old man.”

I spent the night with Mino and the next morning I hurried to Aunt Scolastica's. That relentless grenadier, true to form as usual, refused to see me; but I talked the matter over with mamma at length.

Four days later, I became Custodian of the Boccamazza Foundation under the Department of Education. My salary would be sixty lire a month. Sixty lire a month! I would be richer than the widow Pescatore!
What a triumph!

I almost enjoyed my new place during the first few months — largely on account of Romitelli, whom I could never bring to understand that he had been pensioned by the Town and therefore was under no obligation to continue "working" at the Library. Every morning, at nine o'clock sharp, neither one minute earlier noi one minute later, I would see him coming in on his foui legs. (So I called them — for the two canes he carried, one in each hand, were much more useful than the two rickety stilts with which old age had left him.) Once through the door, he would extract from the pocket of his overcoat a huge old-fashioned watch in a brass case, which he would hang, with its yard or more of chain, on a nail in the wall. Then he would take his seat in the "office," put the two canes between his legs, produce from his inside pocket a skull-cap, a snuff-box, and a red and black checkered handkerchief, take a pinch of snuff, blow his nose, and finally, with these preliminaries laboriously, punctually and scrupulously completed, open a drawer in his desk and get out an old volume belonging to the library: "An Historical Dictionary of Musicians, Artists and Connoisseurs, living and dead," published at Venice in 1758.

"Signer Romitelli!" I would call, watching him go through his methodical routine in perfect self-possession, apparently not in the least aware of my humble presence. "Signer Romitelli!"

But the old man was stone deaf. He would not have heard a cannon had it gone off under his nose. At last I would go up

and shake him by the arm. He would turn around and squint at me, his whole face cooperating in the effort necessary for focussing his eyes; next he would show his yellow teeth in something intended for a smile; then he would slowly lower his head over the ancient volume – one would have thought for a nap to last the rest of the day. But no! On the contrary! He would bring his one serviceable eye to the fraction of an inch from the page and begin pronouncing aloud in a shrill cracked voice: "Birnbaum … Johann Birnbaum…. Johann Abram Birnbaum printed… printed at Leipzic in 1738… at Leipzic in 1738… a pamphlet in octavo… in octavo… on a passage of the Musical… Musical Critic…. Mitzler reprinted this… Mitzler… in the first volume of his Musical Library… in 1739… 1739."

Why was he always repeating such phrases and dates sometimes three or four times? Perhaps to remember them better? And why aloud, if he could not hear a sound? I would stand there and look at him in amazement. That poor old man was about ready for the grave (he died, in fact, four months after my own appointment)! What could he possibly care about a pamphlet that Johann Abram Birnbaum, or any one else, published at Leipzic in 1738? And he had to dig the information out with such a horribly painful effort! Lots of good it would do him in the next world! But I imagine it was a matter of principle with him. Libraries were made to read in. Since not a soul ever entered this one, he must have thought the task devolved on him. He happened on that book as he might have on any other!

On the big table in the "reading-room" – the nave of the old deconsecrated church – not less than an inch of dust had gathered with the years; and one day, to make up for the thanklessness of my village toward a public benefactor, I used the tip of my finger to trace the following inscription in big letters: "To Monsignor Boccamazza, philanthropist, in token of perennial gratitude, this tablet was dedicated by his fellow-citizens."

From time to time two or three books would come tumbling down from one of the higher shelves, followed by a rat as big as a goodsized kitten. On the first such occurrence, I uttered a cry of triumph. Those falling books were to me what Newton's falling apple was to him: "Eureka!" I cried. "Here is something to do at last! I will catch rats and mice, while Romitelli reads about Birnbaum!"

Little as I had learned about my profession as archivist, I knew instinctively what to do in those circumstances. On official paper I drew up a very elaborate memorial to His Excellency, Gerolamo Pomino, Chevalier of the Crown, District Inspector of Education, respectfully petitioning that the Boccamazza Library in the Church of Santa Maria Liberale be provided at the earliest convenience of the Department with at least two (2) cats, the maintenance whereof would result in no addition to the Budget, since the said animals would be abundantly supplied with food from the proceeds of their hunting in said Library. I further respectfully petitioned that the Foundation be authorized to purchase one extra-largetrap, with the bait appertaining thereto (I regarded the word 'cheese' as far too common to submit to the scrutiny of a newly appointed Inspector of Education).

Gerolamo Pomino, Senior, sent me two tiny kittens which had barely been weaned, and were in deadly fear of rats quite as big as they were. To escape starvation they went after the cheese in the trap; and every morning I would find them shut up in the wire cage, lean, scraggly, sorrowful, and too depressed even to mew. I at once addressed a complaint to my superior, and this time I was allowed two honest full-grown cats which set about their business without needing encouragement. The trap, too, no longer stuffed with kittens every night, began to work satisfactorily; and the rats I caught here came into my hands alive. One evening I was a bit put out because Romitelli seemed to pay no attention to all my victories in this field (as though it were his duty to read

the books in the Library while that of the rats was to eat their bindings off); so I decided to take two of my recent captures and put them into the drawer where Romitelli kept the "Historical Dictionary of Dead and Living Painters." "That will get you!" I said to myself.

But I was wrong. When Romitelli opened the drawer and the two rats whizzed past his elbow on their way to freedom, he turned to me and asked:

"What was that?"

"Two rats, Signor Romitelli, two!"

"Ah, rats!" said he quietly. They were as much a part of the Library as he was himself. He opened his book as though nothing at all had happened and began, as usual, to read aloud.

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In a "Treatise on Trees" by Giovan Vittorio Soderini there is a passage which says that "fruit ripeneth in part from heat and in part from, cold, forasmuch as heat manifestly containeth the principle of warming, the which is the efficient cause of maturation." I take it that this venerable pomologist could not have been acquainted with another efficient cause of maturation which is, nevertheless, familiar to fruit-vendors the world over. They take green apples, green pears, green peaches, and the like, and by pinching and otherwise maltreating them reduce them to a soft pulp that has the feel of ripeness.

Thus was my own green soul ripened by the knocks of the world.

In a short time I became a person wholly different from what I had been before. When Romitelli died I was left here in this church where I now am writing, bored to distraction, absolutely, tremendously alone, and yet without a yearning for

company.

Regulations required only a few hours of attendance at the Library. But I shrank from my home as from a torture chamber; and from the village streets in shame for my changed estate. No, far better this deserted, this repudiated church with its books, its rats, and its dusty solitude! Thus I kept arguing to myself. But what could I do to pass the time? I could hunt rats! But would that amusement last?

The first time I found myself with a book in my hands (I had taken it up quite casually from one of the shelves), I experienced a chill of horror. Would I, like Romitelli, finally come to feel it my duty to read for all those other readers who never came? I hurled the book angrily across the room. But then I walked over and picked it up again; I too began to read, and with one eye, also; for my unruly one would have nothing to do with this.

So I read and read, a little of everything, haphazard, but books of philosophy especially. Heavy stuff, I grant you; but when you get a little of it inside you, you grow light as a feather and begin to touch the clouds. I believe I was always a bit queer in my head. But these readings quite finished me. When I no longer knew what I was about, I would shut up the Library, and go off along a little path that led down asteep incline to a solitary strip of seashore. The sight of that monotonous expanse of water filled me with a strange awe that changed little by little into unbearable oppression. As I sat there slowly straining the fine dry sand through my fingers I would lower my head so as not to see; but I could hear, all along the beach, the measured rhythmic wash of the surf.

“So I shall be for always,” I would murmur: “unchanging, till the day of my death.”

Sudden impulses, strange thoughts that were more like flashes of madness, would arise in me from the mortal fixity of my

existence; and I would spring to my feet as though to shake myself free from the stagnation that had gripped me. But there the same sea would come rippling in, splashing its sleepy waves unendingly on the same somnolent shore. Clenching my hands in angry desperation I would cry:

“Why should it be so? Why? Why?”

The tide would come in and a higher wave than usual would wet my feet:

“So you see what you get,” it would seem to say “for asking the reasons for certain things! Wet feet! No, back to your Library, dear boy! Salt water is not good for shoes, and you have no money left to throw away. Back to your Library, and give up philosophy, for a change. You too had better read that Johann Abram Birnbaum published a pamphlet in octavo at Leipzic in 1738. That information will do you no great harm, at the very worst.”

And so it went; until one day they came to tell me that my wife was very ill, and that I was needed at home immediately. I remember that I ran all the way as fast as my legs could carry me; but rather to escape from my own feelings at the moment, to avoid at all hazards any realization of the fact that a man in my condition was about to have a son.

When I reached the door of the house, my mother-in-law stopped me, seized me by the shoulders and turned me around in my tracks:

“A doctor, quick! Romilda is dying! Hurry!”

You would feel like sitting down, would you not, on getting a piece of news like that, full in the face and without warning? But no: “Quick! Hurry! Hurry!”

At any rate I started running back again, not knowing exactly where I was headed this time. Every so often I would shout: “A

doctor!” “A doctor!” Various people tried to stop me to ask what I wanted a doctor for. Others plucked at my sleeve as I ran by. Some of them looked at me with their faces pale with fright. But I dodged them all and went on running: “A doctor!” “A doctor!”

And the doctor, all this time, was there at my house! When I reached home again, after a mad and fruitless round of all the places where a doctor might be found, the first baby had been born; and it was a girl. The second, also a girl, was not so anxious to make its entrance into this world.

So it was twins.

This was all long ago! But I can still see them lying there side by side in their cradle, scratching at each other with those little hands that seemed so beautiful but which were animated nevertheless by some savage instinct that it made one shudder to look upon. The poor miserable things, worse off in life than the kittens I found every morning in my trap! Nor did these babies either have the strength to cry: they could scratch – that’s all!

I moved them apart; and at the first contact of my hands with their soft warm flesh a curious sensation, a feeling of ineffable tenderness, came over me: they were mine!

One of them survived long enough to arouse in me such passionate affection as a father may have, when, with nothing else to live for in this world, he makes his child the sole purpose of existence. Almost a year old, she had become such a beautiful little thing, with golden curls that I would wind about my fingers and kiss with a thirst of love that never could be satisfied! She had learned to say “papa” and I would answer “little one”; then she would say “papa” again. We were like birds calling to one another, from treetop to treetop.

She left us on the day, and almost at the very hour, my mother died. I could not find a way to share my anguish and my care

between, them. When my little girl would fall asleep I would hurry to mother's side. Mamma had no thought for herself, though she knew that she was dying. She talked only of this grandchild of hers, lamenting that she could not see her again and kiss her for the last time. Nine days this torture lasted. I did not close my eyes for a single second. Should I tell the truth about what followed? Most people, I dare gay, would shrink from the confession, human in a very deep humanity though it be. But I must confess that when it was all over, I felt no sorrow whatever at the moment. Rather I was dazed as though I had been struck by a heavy blow. But the point is that then I went to sleep. Just that! I went to sleep. I had to go to sleep; and only when I woke up again did grief for my mother and my little girl assail me — a wild, desperate, ferocious grief, that, while it lasted, was literal madness. One whole night, with I know not what thoughts and intentions in my brain, I wandered aimlessly about the town and the hills and fields surrounding it. I remember that at last I came to the mill on our old "Coops" place. It was early dawn. Filippo, our former miller, was standing on the edge of the flume. He saw me and called me to him. We sat down there under a tree, and he told me stories about my mother and father in the good old days that were no more. I should not take on that way, he said. If mother had gone just then, it was to make things ready for the little girl in the world beyond. There they would find each other, the two of them, and grandma would take baby into her arms and trot her on her knees, never leaving her uncared for, and talking to her always of me.

Three days later I received a check for five hundred lire from brother Berto. I suppose he wanted to compensate me for the nine days torture I had undergone!

But the money was offered ostensibly to provide a decent funeral for mamma. Aunt Scolastica, however, had already attended to that. I put the bank notes away inside an old book in the Library. Later on I took them out and used them on my

own account.

They became, as I shall presently narrate, the occasion of my first demise.

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