

# The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 7 – I change cars

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

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



## The Late Mattia Pascal Chapter 7 I change cars

“First I’ll get ‘The Coops’ out of Purgatory, and go to live there, working the mill. Good idea to keep close to the soil—better still if you can get under it...

“Any trade, when you think of it, has its good points. ... Even a grave digger’s... A miller has the satisfaction of hearing the stones go round... and the flour flies all about and covers you white... Some fun in that...

“Bet they haven’t opened a bag of grain in that mill in a dog’s age... but the moment I take hold of it...

“Signer Mattia, the belt is off the fly-wheel! Eh, Signer

Mattia, need a new shaft here! This gear is loose, Signor Mattia!... As it was in the old days, when mamma was still alive and Malagna was running things...

“While I’m busy at the mill, I’ll have to have somebody look after the farming... and he’ll skin the eye-teeth out of me!... Or, if I attend to that myself, my miller will do me at the mill... A sort of see-saw ... miller up, farm-hand down, farm-hand up, miller down... I sitting in the middle, to balance and enjoy the performance...”

“Ah, I have it... I get into one of those old chests where the widow keeps the clothes of the late Francesco Antonio Pescatore... in camphor and moth balls... like holy relics... dress her up in a suit of them... and let her be miller... and run the other fellow too, for that matter, while I continue holding down my job at old Boccamazza’s library... And life in the country would do Romilda good...”

Such my rambling thoughts as the train ran along. I could not close my eyes, but the vivid picture of that boy lying there on the driveway at Monte Carlo... so naturally, so much at ease, under the green trees, in the cool of the bright morning... would crowd its way to the forefront of my mind. Or, if I succeeded in expelling that horrible vision, another, less bloody but not less terrifying, would take its place: the picture of my mother-in-law and my wife, waiting for me at home.

I had been gone just two weeks minus one day... How would they welcome my return? I amused myself building up the scene in anticipation...

I walk into the house...

The two of them... just a glance, a glance of supreme indifference, as much as to say:

“Huh, back again? And without your neck broken, worse luck!”

For a time, everybody mum, they on their side, I on mine...

Then the widow pipes up... "How about that job you've gone and lost?"

That's so! When I went away, I took the library key off in my pocket... I fail to show up, so the constable breaks down the door. I am nowhere to be found. ... Reported missing!... No news from me anywhere... Four, five, six days... and they give the place to some other loafer like me...

So then... "What is His Royal Highness doing here? Waiting for his dinner? No sir... Been off on a toot for a week or so, eh? Well, you've found your level! Stick to it! But there's no obligation on two hard-working women to support a vagrant about the house! Off on a tear... with who knows what gutter-wench. ..."

And I... mum as an oyster...

And the old woman growing madder and madder, because she can't get a word out of me...

I, in fact, still mum as an oyster...

Until, when she's really blowing off steam... I take a little bundle out of my inside pocket... and begin to count it out on the table... two... six... ten thousand, in that pile... five, seven... ten thousand, in that pile... forty, fifty, sixty... (Four eyes and two mouths wide open: "Who have you been holding up now?"...)

"... seventy thousand, seventy-five thousand... eighty... eighty-one thousand seven hundred and twenty-five... and forty centimes for good measure! ..."

And I gather up the money, stuff it into my purse, put it into my pocket, and get up...

"So you're firing me out? Better than I hoped for! Thanks!

Goodbye and good luck, fair ladies!..."

And I laughed aloud... The people in my compartment had been watching me as I sat there gloating over my triumph... They tried to suppress their mirth when I looked up...

To conceal my humiliation under a scowl, I applied myself to the question of my creditors, who would pounce upon me the moment reports of all that money got around...

"No hiding such a sum... Besides what's the use of money if you can't use it?... A slim chance of spending any of it on myself... Well, so I start in business at the mill, with the income from the farm on the side... but there's the overhead and the repairs ... money here, money there... years and years before I could pay them all off... whereas, for cash, they'd probably settle for little or nothing..."

I went into this latter recourse, dividing my bank notes up between the lot of them:

"That pig-snout of a Recchioni... ten thousand. ... And five more for Filippo Brisigo... wish to God it was for his funeral... seven to Lunaro, the old skinflint. Turin was a better place, after he left... and old woman Lippani... That's about all, I guess... No... there's also Delia Piana, and there's Bossi, and there's Margottini... and—Good God, the whole blamed eighty is gone... So I was working for those people up at Monte Carlo? Why the devil didn't I stop after I won that pile... But for those last two days, I could pay them all, and still be a rich man..."

By this time I was swearing under my breath, and my fellow passengers laughed aloud without restraint. I hitched nervously about in my seat... Daylight was fading from the windows of the car... The air was dry and dusty. Ugh! What a nuisance, a railroad train! Anything to kill time...

I thought I might read myself to sleep... so I bought a newspaper at a station just across the Italian frontier... The

electric lights came on. I unfolded the paper and started on the front page.

Interesting!... The Castle of Valencay sold at auction! Two million three hundred thousand francs!

Counting the lands that go with it, the largest single holding in France! Count de Castellane bought it in...

"Same way I lost 'The Coops,' I guess!"

The King of Spain, at one thirty today, entertained a delegation of Moroccan chiefs at luncheon at the Palace... The mission then paid its respects to the Queen...

"Must have been a good feed."

Paris, the 28th. Envoys from Tibet bringing gifts from the Lama to the President of France.

"What the deuce is a Lama!... Thought it was a kind of camel..."

I did not settle the point, for I fell asleep.

I was awakened by the bumping of my car, as the brakes stopped us short. We were coming into another station. I looked at my watch. Eight fifteen... In another hour I would be arriving at my destination.

The newspaper was still open on my knees. I skipped the item about the Lama and turned the page. My eyes fell on a headline in extra-heavy type:

SUICIDE

Supposing the story referred to the tragedy of that morning at Monte Carlo, I straightened up to read it more carefully... At the first line, which was printed in very small type, I stopped in surprise. "Special despatch, by telegraph, from Miragno."

Miragno? Who's been killing himself down there in my village?

I read on:

"Yesterday, the 28th, a body, in an advanced state of decomposition, was discovered in the mill-flume of the farm called..."

At this point my sight seemed suddenly to go blurred, for I thought the next word was a name familiar to me. The lighting in the compartment was very dim, and that added to the difficulty I experienced in reading with my one eye. I stood up to bring the paper closer to the bulbs...

"... decomposition, was discovered in the mill-flume of the farm called 'The Coops,' located about two miles from this town. The police were notified and proceeded to the spot. The body was recovered from the water and, as the law requires, laid out on the bank under guard, for an inquest by the State's physician. The corpse was later identified as that of our..."

My heart leapt to my throat, and in utter bewilderment I looked about at my companions. They were all asleep.

"body was recovered... laid out on the bank... identified as that of our..."

"I? I?"

"... by the State's physician. The corpse was later identified as that of our village librarian, Mattia Pascal, who has been missing for some days. Financial troubles are assigned as the cause of the tragedy."

"I? Missing? Identified?... Mattia Pascal?"

A ferocious grin upon my face, my heart thumping tumultuously in my breast, I read and reread the lines, I know not how many times. At a first impulse, all my being rebelled in bitter protest, as though that cold, laconic item in the news

required a denial from me, to convince even myself that it was not true. True it was for other people, at any rate; and the conviction—already a day old—that they had of my death impressed me as a crushing, overwhelming, intolerable act of violence unjustly delivered against me, leaving me destroyed for ever. My eyes turned wildly again upon my fellow passengers. Could they be thinking so too? There they sat, sleeping, snoring, in various positions of torture. I felt like shaking them all awake, to scream into their faces that it was not, that it could not be, true.

“But I must be dreaming!”

I caught up the paper again to read the item once more.

I was in a frenzy of excitement. Should I not pull the emergency brake and stop the train? No! Well—what was it poking along that way for? Its monotonous, grinding, bumping, rattling grated on my nerves till I was in a paroxysm of irritation. I opened and closed my hands spasmodically, sinking my nails into my palms. Again I unfolded the paper, holding the two sheets out flat before me, my two arms extended. ... Then I folded it up again, with the article on the outside. But I knew what it said, by heart.

“Identified! How? How could they have identified me? In an advanced state of decomposition... a-a-ah!”

I thought of myself for a moment floating there in the green water of the Flume—my body blackened, swollen, bursting, disgusting to look upon... With a shudder of horrified loathing, I crossed my arms over my breast, pinching my biceps with either hand:

“I? No, not I!...” Who can it have been? Someone like me, certainly... my beard, perhaps... my build... And they identified me!...

“‘Missing for some days.’... A-ah yes! But one thing I should

like to know: I should like to know who was in such a hurry to get me identified? That poor devil... as much like me as all that? Just like me—clothes, everything? Ah, I see! It was she... it was Marianna Dondi... that Pescatore woman! Hoping it would be I, she made it so! She identified me, at once, off hand! Too good almost to be true! Just hear her taking on: 'Oh my poor, poor boy! Oh my poor, poor Mattia! Yes, it's he! It's he! What will my daughter ever do now...!' And she probably found a few tears too—and improvised a scene beside the corpse! The poor devil was too dead to boot her out of there with a 'Give us a rest: I don't know you!'"

I was quite beside myself. The train drew into another station and came to a stop. I threw open the side door and jumped to the ground, with the idea of doing something about it immediately—a telegram perhaps contradicting the report of my death. But I struck so hard upon the platform of the station, that I was jarred from head to foot; and to that I owed my salvation. For a sudden realization flashed through my mind, as though the stupid obsession that had taken hold on me had been shaken loose:

"Of course! Freedom! Liberty! Why did you not think of it before? Freedom! Freedom! The chance for a new life!"

Eighty-two thousand lire in my inside pocket, and no obligations to anyone. I was dead! And a dead man has no debts! A dead man has no wife! A dead man has no mother-in-law! What more could a fellow ask for? I was free, free, free!

I must have had a very queer look as I stood there beside my car with this new inspiration written over my face. In any case, I had left the compartment door open behind me; and I was suddenly aware of a number of trainmen calling to me, I did not know why. One of them ran up to me at last, shook me by the arm, and shouted angrily: "Get aboard, man! The train is starting!"



“Let her start!” I answered. “Let her start! I’m changing cars!”

But now a terrifying doubt came into my mind. That report—supposing it had already been denied? Supposing people at Miragno had discovered the mistake—relatives of the dead man perhaps, making a real identification... Before counting my chickens, I had better wait for them to hatch... I ought to get confirmation of the whole story. And how, how?

I felt for the newspaper in my pockets, but, unfortunately, I had left it in the train. Instinctively my eyes turned down along the deserted track that stretched away into the night, its two lines of cold steel shining bright from the lamps of the station. A pang of utter loneliness came over me and for a second I quite lost my head again. What a nightmare! And supposing it were all just a dream! But no... I had really read the thing: “Special despatch, by telegraph, from Miragno, yesterday, the 28th...”

“You see? You can say it over word for word! No dream then! And yet... well, you need proof, more proof than that!”

Where was I, anyhow?

I looked for the sign on the front of the station: ALENGA.

Not much of a place! And it was Sunday, too. Poor chance of a fellow’s finding a newspaper in that hole on a holiday! And yet, Miragno was not so far away! Well, at Miragno, that morning, there must have been an edition of the Compendium, the only paper published in the neighborhood. I must get a copy, somehow. The Compendium would be sure to have the story, down to the last detail. But Alenga! How expect anybody in Alenga to have the Compendium? But I could telegraph. Ah, that was an idea! I could telegraph—assumed name of course! I could telegraph to the editor—Miro Colzi—everybody knew Miro Colzi—the “Meadow Lark” as we called him, after he got out a volume of poems—his first and last—under that title. But the

“Meadow Lark!” Wouldn’t he think it suspicious to be getting an order for his paper from Alenga? Certainly the leading story for that issue—the paper was a weekly—would be my suicide.

Wouldn’t there be some risk in telegraphing—telegraphing especially for that particular number?

“But, no, how could there be?” I then thought. “Colzi will have it in his head that I am dead! Meantime he has ambitions of his own. He is attacking this administration on the water and gas question. He’ll imagine people here have heard about him and want to read his last editorial.”

I went along into the station.

Luckily the mail carrier had stopped for a chat with the freight agent; and his wagon was still there. It was some four miles from the station to the village of Alenga proper, and uphill all the way.

I climbed into the rickety cart; and we drove off into the dark, without lights on the wagon of any kind.

There were many things for me to think about; and yet, from time to time, in the black solitude all about me now, I would be overwhelmed by the same violent emotion I had received in the train from the reading of that disconcerting piece of news. It was that same sense of loneliness I had experienced at sight of the rails of the deserted track, a feeling of fear and uneasiness, as though I were the ghost of my dead self, astray somewhere, cut off from life, and yet certain to continue living, beyond my death, without knowing just how.

To shake off my uncanny oppression, I struck up a conversation with my driver.

“Is there a news agency at Alenga?”

“Agency?—No, sir!”

“What? Can’t you buy a newspaper in the place?”

“Ah, newspapers! Yes, you can get them from Grot-tanelli, at the drug store!”

“I suppose there’s a hotel?”

“There’s a boarding house—Palmentino’s.”

We had come to a steep incline; and the man got down from his seat to make a lighter load for his poor winded nag. In the almost total darkness I could scarcely distinguish his figure as he walked along. But at one point he stopped to light his pipe, and I could see him clearly. A shudder ran over me: “If he only knew who it is he has with him tonight...!”

But then I turned the same query upon myself!

“Well, who is it he has with him! I couldn’t say! am I? I shall have to decide. I need a name, at least—and before long! When they send the telegram, I shall have to give them a name to sign; and I mustn’t be embarrassed when they ask for one at the boarding house. Yes, a name—just a name will do, for a starter. Let’s see: what is my name?”

I should never have dreamed it would be so hard to find a name, especially a last name. I began fitting syllables together just as they came into my mind; and I got all sorts of queer things as a result! “Strozzani,” “Parbetta,” “Martoni,” “Bartusi.” Ugh!

The problem began to grip my nerves. The names I found seemed all so meaningless, so empty!—“Nonsense! As though names needed to have meanings! Come, pull yourself together! Anything will do! You had Martoni! What’s the matter with Martoni? Charles Martoni—there you are!” But a moment later, I would shrug my shoulders! “Yes, Charles—Martel!” And so, all over again!

We arrived at the village and still I had failed to make up my

mind. Fortunately there was no occasion for using a name for the druggist, who proved to be telegraph clerk, postal clerk, pharmacist, stationer, newsboy, all around donkey, and I don't know what else.

I bought copies of the newspapers he had in stock, the Carriere and the Secolo from Milan, the Caffaro, and one or two others, from Genoa.

"I don't suppose you have the Compendium of Miragno?"

Grottanelli had a pair of big round owl's eyes, that looked like balls of glass. Every so often he would force a pair of stiff, thick eyelids down over them. "The Compendium? of Miragno?... Never heard of it!"

"It's a small town sheet, weekly, I believe! I thought I would like to see it—today's number, that is!"

"The Compendium? Miragno? Never heard of it!" And he kept repeating this, stolidly.

"That doesn't matter. Few people have! Nevertheless, I've got to have ten or dozen copies of the thing right away. Can you get them for me? I'll pay the expenses for telegraphing the order tonight."

The man made no answer. A blank expression on his face, he persisted still: "The Compendium? Miragno? Never heard of it!" But he finally consented to make up the telegram, at my dictation, and to give his store as the address.

It was a horrible night I passed there in the boarding house of Palmentino's, a sleepless night of distracted tossing on a sea of tumultuous thoughts and worries. But the afternoon mail of the following day brought me fifteen copies of the Compendium.

The Genoa papers of the day before had said nothing whatever about the tragedy at Miragno; and now my hands trembled as I

opened the bundle before me.

On the first page, nothing. Feverishly I turned to the inner sheets.

Ah! Across two columns of the third page ran lines of mourning in heavy black. Under them was my name in big broadfaced type:

MATTIA PASCAL

“He had been missing for some days—days of consternation and unspeakable anguish for his family, and of concern for the people of this town who had learned to love Mattia Pascal for that goodness of heart and joviality of temperament which, with his other gifts of character, enabled him to meet misfortune with dignity and courage, and to fall, without loss of public esteem, from the moneyed ease that once was his to the humble circumstances in which he lived in recent years.

“After a day of unexplained absence on his part, his family went, in some alarm, to the Boccamazza Library where Mattia Pascal, passionately devoted to his work as a public servant, spent most of his time, enriching with wide and varied readings his native endowments as a scholar. The door of the Library was closed and locked, a fact which at first gave rise to very grave suspicions. For the moment, however, these were shown to be groundless; and it was hoped that our beloved Librarian had slipped out of town on private business which he had divulged to no one. But alas, the sorry truth was soon to be revealed. The death of his mother, whom he adored, and on the same day, of his only child, together with financial worries arising from the loss of his ancestral properties, had shaken our poor friend too deeply!

“It seems that, on a previous occasion, some three months ago, Mattia Pascal tried to put an end to his unhappy days in the very water where his body has just been found—the mill-flume of the estate known as ‘The Coops,’ which, in days gone by, had been one of the prides of the Pascal inheritance. We got

the story from a former employee of the family, Filippo Brina, miller on the farm. Standing there beside the corpse—it was night, and two policemen, with lanterns, were on guard about the body—the old man with tears in his eyes, told the reporter of the Compendium how he had prevented the grieving son and father from executing his violent intention at that time. But Filippo Brina could not always be on hand. On his second attempt to end his own life, Mattia Pascal threw himself into the Flume and there his body lay for two whole days.

“There was a heartrending scene when, night before last, the desperate widow was led down to the water’s edge to view the now unrecognizable remains of her loved companion who had gone to join his daughter and his mother in the other world.

“In token of sympathy for her bereavement and of esteem for the departed, the people of the town turned out, en masse, to accompany the body to its last resting place, over which our Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Gerolamo Pomino, Chevalier of the Crown, pronounced a touching eulogy.

“The Compendium extends to the bereaved family and to Mr. Roberto Pascal, brother of the deceased and formerly a resident of this town, expressions of its sincerest sympathy. Vale, dilecte amice, vale!

M. C.”

Though I should have been quite dismayed had I found nothing in the paper, I must confess that my name, printed there, under that black line, did not give me the pleasure I had expected. On the contrary, it filled me with such painful emotions that after a few lines I had to give up. That touch about the “consternation” and “anguish” of my “bereaved” family did not amuse me at all; nor did the bosh about the “esteem” of my fellow townsmen, or my “passionate” devotion to my work a public servant. Rather I was impressed by the reference to the night of mourning I had passed at “The Coops”

after the death of mother and my little girl. The fact that that had served as a proof, indeed as the strongest proof, of my suicide at first surprised me as an unforeseen and cynical irony of fate. Then it caused me shame and remorse.

No, I had no right to the profits of such a cruel misunderstanding. I had not killed myself in sorrow for my two dearest ones, though the thought of doing so had indeed occurred to me that night. To be sure, I had run away, in sheer despair at that great bereavement. But here I was on my way home again; and from a gambling house where Fortune had smiled on me in the strangest manner!

Just as she was continuing to smile! For here, now, if you please, someone else, someone surely whom I did not even know, had killed himself in my place; and, depriving this benefactor of mine of the pity and the sorrow of friends and relatives which rightfully belonged to him, I was also compelling him to submit to the hypocritical weeping of my wife and my mother-in-law and even to a eulogy from the painted lips of Mr. Gerolamo Pomino!

Yes, these were my first impressions on reading my obituary in the Miragno Compendium. But then I reflected that, of course, the poor fellow had not really died on my account, and that I could not render him the slightest service by coming to life again. The fact that I would gain incidentally from his misfortune imposed no sacrifice on his people. Indeed I would be doing them a favor by keeping still. In their eyes, the suicide was I, Mattia Pascal. They could still hope that their man had simply disappeared, that he might return again almost any day.

As for my wife and my mother-in-law, did I owe them any consideration in the matter? All that "anguish," all that "consternation"—was it really so? Were they not, more probably, phrases, invented by the "Meadow Lark"? To make sure whether it was I or not, all they had to do, was lift the

eyelid of my left eye! And anyhow—even if there had been no eyes left—a woman isn't fooled so easily as that where her own husband is concerned! Why were they so anxious to have it me? Doubtless the widow Pescatore hoped that Malagna would feel just a little bit responsible for my terrible end, and come to the rescue of his poor "niece" again.

Well, if that was their game, why should I try to spoil it?

"Dead? Buried? That suits me! A cross on the grave, and good-bye, fair ladies!"

I arose from the table where I had been reading, stretched my arms and legs deliriously and heaved a deep sigh of relief.

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[collabora@pirandelloweb.com](mailto:collabora@pirandelloweb.com)

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