The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 8 – Adriano Meis

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In Italiano – Il fu Mattia Pascal

En Español – El difunto Matias Pascal

The Late Mattia Pascal
Chapter 8
Adriano Meis

Straightway, not so much to deceive other people—they had deceived themselves, you understand, and with a haste and readiness which may not have been without some justification in my case, but which still was a trifle too precipitous—as to take my cue from Fortune and to satisfy a real need of my own, I set out to make myself over into another man.

I had scant reason to be proud of the miserable failure whom the people back home had insisted on drowning—whether he liked it or not—in the waters of a mill-flume. In view of the life he had led up to that time, the late Mattia Pascal deserved, surely, no better fate. So now I was anxious to obliterate,

not only in exteriors, but substantially, intimately also, every trace of him that was left in me.

Here I was alone, more wholly alone than I could ever hope to be again on this earth; free from every present bond and obligation, a new man, my own master absolutely, with no past to drag along behind me, with a future that could be anything I might choose to make it. Oh for a pair of wings! How airy, how light I felt!

The attitude toward the world that past experiences impressed upon me had no longer any basis in rea-lo3 son. I could acquire a new sense of life, without regard to the unhappy trials of the late Mattia Pascal. It was for me to decide: I had the opportunity, with every prospect of success, to work out a new destiny in just such ample measure as Fortune seemed to be allowing me.

“One thing I’ll be mighty careful of,” I said to myself: “I’ll make certain to preserve this freedom of mine above all else. I will seek out paths that are ever level and ever new, and never let my liberty become sodden with troubles. The moment life begins to look unpleasant anywhere, I’ll look the other way, and move on. I’ll concentrate on the things people ordinarily call inanimate, living in quiet attractive places, where there are beautiful views, perhaps. Little by little I’ll get a new training, a new education, working hard and patiently to make my very self new, also. In the end I shall be able to boast not only of having lived two entirely different lives but of having been two entirely different people….”

I began, for that matter, right where I was. A few hours before I left Alenga I went into a barber shop and had my beard trimmed close. I had first thought of getting a clean shave; but then I decided that such a radical step might arouse suspicion in such a little town.

The barber was a tailor also, by trade, and the effects of this second calling were evident in his aged form, almost bent double by his long sittings in one cramped position, leaning over his work with his glasses perched on the end of his nose. I concluded, in fact, that lie was more tailor, probably, than barber. Armed with a pair of cutter's shears, with blades so long that he had to hold them up at the end with his other hand, he fell, like the wrath of God, upon the whiskers of the late Mattia Pascal. I dared hardly draw a breath. I closed my eyes and kept them closed till, at last, I felt a tugging at my sleeve. The old man, streaming with perspiration, was holding a mirror up in front of me so that I might say whether he had performed the operation well.

This was asking too much, it seemed to me; and I parried:

"No, thank you! Never mind! I'm afraid the shock would break it!"

"Break what?"

"The mirror! A pretty thing it is, too! Antique, I imagine!"

It was a small round glass with a heavy handle of carved ivory—who knows from what boudoir of the aristocracy? And through what devious history, had it ever gotten into that out-of-the-way shop of a rural
barber-tailor? However, in order not to hurt the old artisan's feelings—he stood there unable to grasp what I was talking about—I put the thing in front of my face.

The destruction already wrought on my cheeks, jaws and chin gave me warning in advance as to the kind of monster that would eventually come forth from the thicket behind which the late Mattia Pascal had skulked through his unhappy life. I had another good reason, besides, for detesting the fellow cordially. A tiny projection of a chin, pointed and receding! And he had kept the matter quiet for so long! Henceforth—and it seemed downright treason to me—I should have to carry that

chin around in the full light of day! And my dot of a nose, above! And that everlasting coek-eye!

“This eye,” I reflected, “straying away off here to one side, will always be something belonging to Mm, in the new face I am going to have. The best I can ever do will be to wear a pair of colored spectacles, which ought to help—help a great deal, indeed, to make me look reasonably attractive. I’ll let my hair grow long; and what with this truly imposing brow I have already and the smooth chin and the glasses I am going to have, I’ll look more or less like a German philosopher; especially when I fill out the picture with a long straight coat and a soft broad-brimmed hat!”

There was no way out of it: starting with the raw materials actually available, a philosopher I had to be! “But, anyhow, we’ll do the best we can!” I would work out some philosophy or other—a cheerful one, you may be sure—to serve me in my passage through the humanity about me—a humanity, which, try as I would, I could regard only as a very ridiculous, a very small and petty affair!

A name was at last provided—handed to me, one might say—on the train, a few hours north of Alenga on the line toward Turin.

There were two gentlemen in my compartment, engaged in an animated discussion on early Christian ikonography, a branch of learning in which, to an ignoramus like me, they both seemed very well versed indeed. The younger of the two men—a slight pale-faced fellow with a curly black beard—seemed to take a malicious satisfaction in supporting (on the authority of Justin the Martyr, Tertullian, and I forget who else) an ancient tradition, to the effect that Christ had a very ugly face. He delivered this opinion in a heavy cavernous voice that contrasted strangely with his pale ascetic slenderness.

“Yes, sir, just that, just that: ugly, no more, no less! And Kirillos of Alexandria, you know, goes farther still—yes sir!

Kirillos of Alexandria says, word for word, that Christ was the ugliest of all living men!”

His companion, a placid tranquil old scholar, not over-attentive to his person, but with a smile of subtle irony drawing down the corners of his mouth (his head toppling forward on a long neck as he sat there erect) was inclined to think that little reliance could be placed on such primitive traditions:

“In those early days,” said he, “the Church was all taken up with the teachings and the spiritual aspects of its Founder. Little, or even, as one may say, no attention at all, was paid to his corporeal features.”

At a certain point the conversation turned to Saint Veronica and two statues in the ancient city of Panea which by some were held to be images of the Christ with the lady of the miracle before him.

“Nothing of the kind,” the younger man declared. “I didn’t know there was any doubt about it either: those two statues represent the Emperor Adriano (Hadrian) with the city kneeling in submission at his feet.”

The old scholar placidly stuck to his opinion, which must have been a contrary one; for his colleague, turning now toward me, insisted obstinately:

“Adriano!”

“_Beronike_ in Greek—and from _Beronike_ we get _Veronica_….”

“Adriano!” (still to me).

“So you see: _Veronica, vera icon_—a very natural distortion. …”

“Adriano!” (again to me).

“… for the _Beronike_ mentioned in the ‘Acts of Pilate’…”

“Adriano!”

And he said “Adriano” over and over again, looking at me as though he expected my support in the matter.

The train came into a station and they got out, still arguing heatedly. I went to the window and leaned forward, to watch them. They had taken a few steps when the old man lost his temper and stalked off by himself in another direction.

“Who’s your authority? Who’s your authority?” the younger fellow called after him defiantly. The old man turned and shouted back: “Camillo de Meis!”

I got the impression that he too meant his answer for me. I had been mechanically repeating the “Adriano” which the other man had so drilled into my ears. I simply threw the _de_ away and kept the “Meis.”

“Adriano Meis! Yes, that will do. Sounds quite distinguished and unusual: Adriano Meis!”

And I thought besides that the name went well with the smooth face, the colored glasses, the straight coat, and broad-brimmed hat I was eventually to wear.

“Adriano Meis! Fine! Those squabbling Christians have baptized me!”

Deliberately suppressing in myself all thoughts of my life just past, and concentrating on the purpose of beginning a new existence from that moment, my whole being seemed to expand with a fresh childlike glee. It was as though I had been born again, guileless, limpid, pure, transparent, my senses and my consciousness awake and watchful to take advantage of everything that might contribute to the upbuilding of my new personality. My soul meanwhile soared aloft in the joy of this new freedom. Never had people and things looked to me as they

did now. The air between us seemed suddenly to have lost its cloudiness. How approachable human beings now appeared! How easy and unstrained the relations I would henceforth establish with them—all the more since I would have very little to ask of men to satisfy the requirements of the placid felicity that would be mine! What a delicious sense of spiritual lightness! What a gentle, what a serenely ineffable intoxication! Fortune, quite beyond all my hopes and expectations, had swept off the complicated coils that had been strangling me; and drawing me aside from ordinary life, made me an impartial spectator of the struggle for existence in which others were still entangled: "Just wait," a voice whispered in my ear, "and you'll see how amusing it all is when you view it from a point of vantage on the outside. That fellow, for instance! Here he was souring his own stomach, goading a poor old man to rage, for the mere sake of proving that our good Lord was the ugliest of all living men!"

I smiled fatuously. And I began to smile that way, at everything: at the lines of trees that wheeled past me as my express rushed along; at the farmhouses scattered over the countryside, where I could imagine peasants puffing and blowing at the chill fog that might come some night to sear the olive trees; or shaking their fists at the sky which refused and refused to send them rain; at the birds escaping in terror to right and left as the locomotive came thundering up; at the telegraph poles flitting by the car-windows—hot with "news," doubtless (like that of my suicide in the mill-flume at Miragno!); at the poor wives of the flagmen, who stood at the crossings waving their red warning signals—the regulation caps of their husbands on their heads.

Until at last my eye chanced to fall upon the plain gold ring which encircled the third finger of my left hand.

I came to myself with a violent start. I winced. I closed my eyes. Then I clapped my right hand down over my left and tried

to work the ring loose, stealthily, without attracting my own attention, as it were! The ring came off. I could not help remembering that around the inside of it two names were engraved: “Mattia—Romilda,” with a date.

What should I do with it?…

I opened my eyes; and for a time I sat there frowning at the ring as it lay in the palm of my hand.

Everything around me had lost its charm. Here still was one last link in the chain that held me to my past! What a tiny bit of metal, in itself! So light, and yet so heavy!

But the chain was broken, broken, thank God! Why so mawkish then over this, the last of its fragments?

I started to throw the ring out of the window, but then I thought: “So far Fortune has been with me—exceptionally, miraculously, with me. I must not abuse her good nature, now.” I had come to a point where I believed everything possible—even this: that a small ring tossed off a train on a rarely frequented railroad track might be found by some one, a laborer, say; and passing from hand to hand, come to reveal in the end—by virtue of the two names inscribed upon it—the truth: the truth, that is, that the victim of the mill-flume tragedy at Miragno was not the librarian of Santa Maria Liberale—was not the late Mattia Pascal.

“No, no,” I murmured to myself, “No, I must wait for a surer place—but where?”

The train stopped at another station. A workman was standing on the platform with a box of tools. I bought a file from him. When the train started again, I cut the ring into small bits and scattered them out of the window.

Less to control the direction of my thoughts, than to give a certain substantiality to my new life hitherto floating

impalpable in void, I began to think of Adriano Meis, to create a past for him, giving him a father and a birth-place, setting about this problem, also, in a leisurely, methodical manner, trying to establish each detail vividly and definitely in my own mind.

I would be an only son: that point seemed certain beyond dispute.

“I doubt if there was ever a more only son than I … and yet, when you think of it… how many; people like me must there be in the world—my brothers, therefore, in a way! Your hat, your coat, a letter, on the railing of a bridge… deep water underneath… but instead of jumping in, you take a steamer… to America, or elsewhere. A week later, they find a corpse … too far gone to identify. It’s the man off the bridge, of course—and no one thinks of the matter twice. To be sure, I didn’t arrange this business myself—no letter, no coat, no hat, no bridge…. But otherwise my situation is the same—in fact, there’s one thing to my advantage in it—I can enjoy my freedom without any remorse whatever. They forced it on me, they did….

“So then, an only son… born… wonder if I had better say where? Well, how can you avoid it? A fellow doesn’t come down from the clouds—the moon, for instance, as midwife! Though I remember reading in a book in the Library that the ancients used the moon in some such way—prospective mothers praying to her under the name of Lucina….

“However, I was not born in heaven! How keep off the earth?

“Stupid! Of course! At sea! You were born at sea! On a steamer! My parents were traveling at the time…. Traveling, with a baby about to come? Hardly plausible! How get them to sea? They were emigrants… had to come home from America! Why not? Everybody goes to America. Even the late Mattia Pascal, poor devil, started for there in his time. So my father

earned these eighty thousand lire in America? Nonsense! If he had had that much money, his wife would have been comfortably fixed in a hospital. They would have waited for me to come, before starting on their journey. Besides, you don't get rich so easily in America any more…. My father… by the way, what was his name?… Paolo! yes, Paolo Meis! My father, Paolo Meis, had a hard time over there… as so many do. Three or four years of bad luck… then, discouraged—humble pie!—A letter to his old man… my grandfather, that is…"

I insisted on having a grandfather…. "He lived long enough for me to know him well—a nice old man … like that professor who got off the train some stations back—professor of Christian ikonography, I think he was…."

Strange how the mind works! Why was it I came so naturally to think of my father, Paolo Meis, as a no-account.., who… of course, how else?… had been the torment of my grandfather, marrying against the letter's will and eloping to America?

"I suppose he too believed that Jesus was the ugliest of living men! And he must have got his full deserts off there in South America, if, with his wife in a precarious condition, he bought the tickets, the moment my grandfather's money came, and sailed for home again….

"Need I have been born at sea, necessarily, though? Why not in South America, simply—in Argentina… a few months before my father returned? Yes, much better that way, in fact. Because grandpa was tickled when he heard about me—forgave his scapegrace son just on my account! So I crossed the Atlantic; while still a tiny baby! Third class, probably! And I caught the croup on the way over, and almost died. That at least is what grandpa always told me….

"Now some people would say I might be sorry I didn't die on that occasion, when I was too small to notice much…. I am not of that opinion! What troubles, what trials, after all, have I

been through in my life-time? Only one, to tell the truth: that was when my grandfather died—I had grown up with him, you see. For my father, Paolo Meis, scalawag that he was—never able to stick to any one thing—went back to South America again—after a few months—leaving his wife with my grandfather. Paolo Meis died over there—yellow fever. By the time I was three, I lost my mother too—so I never really knew them—only the few things I learned later on…. And that isn't the worst of it. I never found out exactly where I was born. Argentina… yes… but that's a big place… what town in Argentina? Grandpa didn't know… couldn't remember that father ever told him and he never thought to ask… I, of course, was too young to remember such things…"

In short: (a) an only son—of Paolo Meis, (b) born in South America, in the Argentine Republic, locality unknown; (c) brought to Italy when a few months old (croup); (d) no memory, and little information, about my parents; (e) reared and educated by my grandfather.

Where? Here, there, everywhere! First at Nice: rather vague recollections of Nice; _Piazza Massena_; the _Promenade des Anglais_; the _Avenue de la Gare_;… After that, Turin.

I was on my way to Turin, at present; and there, I would attend to many things: I would pick out a street and a house, where my grandfather boarded me till I was ten years old, in a family which I would settle just there, being sure it fitted the background well. There I would live, or rather relive, all the boyhood of Adriano Meis.

* * *

This pursuit, this game, of creating out of sheer fancy a life which I had never really lived, which I pieced together from details observed in people and in places here and there, and which I made my own and felt to be my own, amused me mightily in the first days of my wanderings—though the pleasure had ever an undercurrent of sadness. I made it my daily work,

however. I lived not only in the present but in a past, the past which Adriano Meis had not as yet lived.

I kept, I may say, very little of what I thought of originally. Nothing, I believe, is ever imagined, unless it have roots of greater or lesser depth in actual experience. On the other hand, the strangest things may be true when this latter is the case. The human mind could never dream of certain impossible situations that rush out to meet you from the tumultuous inwards of life as it is lived; though always, the living, breathing, palpitating reality is different—and how different!—from the inventions we erect upon it. How many things
we need—and how unutterably minute they are, how entirely inconceivable!—to reconstitute that reality from which we derive our fictions! How many lines we must bring together again in the complicated skein of life—lines which we have cut to make our situation something individual, something standing by itself!

Now, what was I but a creature of the imagination? I was a walking fiction which was determined and, for that matter, obliged, to stand by itself though dependent on, immersed in, reality. Daily witnessing, daily observing in detail, the life that the world about me was living, I was conscious at once of its infinitude of inner concatenations and of the many bonds which I had severed between me and it. Could I reunite all those broken connections with reality? Who knows where they would finally drag me? They might prove to be the reins of wild horses pulling the frail chariot of my necessary fictioning to destruction in the end. No! I should be careful to do nothing more than reintegrate the imaginary experience.

On the playgrounds, in the public gardens, about the streets, I would follow and study children from five to ten years old, noting their ways, their language, their games, in order gradually to construct an infancy for Adriano Meis. And I succeeded so well that eventually his childhood had a

relatively substantial existence in my mind. I decided not to create a new mother for myself. That I should have regarded as profaning a beautiful and sacred memory. But a grandfather—that was different! With real gusto I set about fashioning one—the one I had thought of in my first outline.

How may real grand-daddies—little old men whom I picked out and followed about, now at Turin, now at Venice, now at Milan—went into the delightful ancestor of my own dreams. One would give me his ivory snuffbox; and his checker-board handkerchief with red and black squares; another would furnish his cane; a third his glasses and his long two-pointed beard; a fourth his amusing walk and the thunderous way he sneezed or blew his nose; a fifth his curious high-pitched voice and laugh. The grandparent I eventually produced, was a shrewd and canny old fellow, something of a grumpus, a wise connoisseur of the arts, a man contemptuous of modern things and therefore unwilling to send me to school, preferring to educate me by conversations with himself on long walks about the city to the museums and picture galleries. On my visits to Milan, Padua, and Venice, to Ravenna, Florence, and Perugia, I had this dear old man always at my side—talking to me more than once, however, through the mouths of professional guides!

At the same time, I was keen to live my own life in the present. Every now and then, the realization of my limitless, my unheard-of freedom would sweep over me, filling me with such exquisite delight that I would be caught up into a sort of beatified ecstasy. I would take in one deep breath after another to feel my whole spirit expand with my lungs. Alone! Alone! Master of myself! Not an obligation to anyone, nor a responsibility for anyone! Where shall we go today? To Venice? To Venice we go! To Florence? Very well, to Florence, then! And inseparable from me was my exultant felicity!

I remember particularly, one evening at Turin, in the first weeks of my new life. The sun was setting. I was standing on the boulevard along the Po, near a mole thrown out into the

foaming stream to shelter a fish pound. The air was marvellously clear, so clear that everything seemed gilded, enameled in the limpid brightness of the twilight. The sense of my freedom now came over me with such intenseness that I really thought I was losing my mind. I tore myself away, to put an end to my mad enjoyment.

I had long since attended to the remodeling of my exterior semblance. My beard was gone. I had selected a light blue tint for my spectacles. Letting my hair grow, I had succeeded in giving it a touch of artistic unruliness. With these modifications I was quite another person. Sometimes I would stop in front of a mirror and have a long conversation with myself, unable meantime to keep from laughing:

“Adriano Meis, you are a lucky dog on the whole! Pity I had to give you a makeup just like this—but after all, what does it matter? It gets by! It gets by! If it weren’t for that cock-eye, which belongs to him really, you would not be half bad looking. In fact, there is something actually impressive about your features: you have personality, as they say. It’s true the women laugh at you a little; but that’s not altogether your fault. If _he_ hadn’t cropped his hair quite so close, you wouldn’t be obliged to wear it quite so long; and certainly it’s from no choice of your own that you go around as sleekly jowled as a priest. Anyhow, cheer up! When the ladies laugh, just give a snicker or two yourself—and you’ll survive it, you’ll survive it!…”

For the rest, I lived almost exclusively by myself and for myself. If I exchanged a word occasionally with an inn-keeper, a waiter, a chamber-maid, a neighbor at table, it was never for the sake of conversation. My disinclination toward more intimate contacts showed me, furthermore, that I had an innate distaste for lying and deceit. Not that other people were so anxious to become better acquainted! On the contrary, my general appearance tended to keep them away—making me look like a foreigner, probably. I remember that on one of my

visits to Venice, I proved unable to convince an old gondolier that I was not a German—an _Austriaco_; whereas I was actually born, in Argentina if you wish, but still of Italian parentage. What really made me an “outsider” was something quite different and known to me alone: in reality, I was nobody. No public registry bore a record of me, except the documents in Miragno—and according to them I was dead and buried, under my other name.

I did not mind all this so very much; and yet I could not reconcile myself to passing for an Austrian. Never before had I had occasion to center my mind on the notion of “country.” In the old days there had been plenty of other things to worry about! But now, in my leisure and solitude, I became accustomed to meditating on many things I should never before have regarded as of any possible interest to me. Indeed, I would often find myself following such trains of thought quite involuntarily, and be somewhat put out because they seemed to lead nowhere. Yet I had to do something to pass my time—once I had my fill of traveling and sight-seeing. To escape my own reflections, when these began to lie heavy on my mind, I would sometimes turn to writing, filling sheet after sheet of paper with my new signature, holding my pen in a new way with the idea of producing a new style of hand. But sooner or later I would tear my paper up and throw my pen aside. I might very well be illiterate, for all the writing I should have to do! To whom would I ever be called upon to write? Henceforth I could and would receive no letters from anybody.

This particular thought, like many others, unfailingly plunged me into my past again. My home, the Library, the streets of Miragno, the sea-shore, would come into my mind. “Wonder if Romilda is still wearing black! I suppose so—just for appearances. What can she be doing now?” And I would think of her as I had seen her, in those days, about the house; and of the widow Pescatore, as well—cursing my memory every time she thought of me, I could be sure.

“I’ll bet neither one of them has paid a single visit to that poor man there in the cemetery—a terrible end he came to, at that! Where do you suppose they put my grave? Probably Aunt Scolastica refused to lay out as much money on my funeral as she did for mamma’s; and of course, Berto wouldn’t do anything. I can just hear him: ‘Who obliged Mattia to go and do that? I didn’t! He had two lire a day from his job at the library! How much did he need to get along?’ No, they turned the dirt up and buried me like a dog! In one of the town lots, too, I ‘ll bet my hat! Well, what of it? What do I care? Just the same, I am sorry for that poor man. Ten to one he had a few people who were fond of him and would have treated him to a better send off! And yet, little he need worry now? He’s over with his troubles!”

I continued traveling about for some time, going beyond the confines of Italy, down the Rhine, for instance, as far as Cologne, following the river on an excursion steamer: Mannheim, Worms, Mainz, Bingen, Coblenz. I had thought of keeping on up into Scandinavia; but then I considered that I would have to put some limits to my expenditures. My money had to last me for the rest of my days; and you couldn’t call it very much for such a purpose: I could bank on living thirty years more at least. Outside the law in the sense that I could produce no document to prove, let alone my identity, the fact that I was even alive, I could not possibly find any lucrative employment. To keep out of trouble, therefore, I should have to restrict my outlay to the bare comforts. Taking account of stock, I saw that I must not exceed two hundred lire a month. Not rank luxury, by any means! And yet, back home the three of us had gotten along on half of that! Yes, I could manage!

But, away down underneath, I was getting tired of this going about from place to place, in silence and alone. I was beginning, despite myself, to feel the need for some companionship—as I discovered one gloomy evening in Milan shortly after returning from my trip to Germany.

It was a cold day, cloudy, and threatening rain. I happened to notice an old man huddled up against a lamp-post. He was selling matches, and the box, hanging from his neck by a strap, prevented him from drawing his ragged overcoat warmly enough about him. He was blowing on the back of his hands and I observed that a string ran from one of his fists down between his legs. On looking closer, I saw it was the leash for a mere speck of a puppy, three or four days old at the most, lying there between the old beggar's worn-out shoes, shivering with cold, and whining piteously.

"Want to sell that pup?" I asked.

"Yes," the man answered, "and for very little, though he's worth a lot of money! A fine dog, he's going to make some day, this little brute! You can have him for twenty-five!"

The poor puppy continued whimpering, though that estimate of his worth might have set him up considerably—I suppose he understood, however, that in mentioning such a figure, his master was appraising not the future merits of the dog but the stupidity he thought he could read on my face. But I, meantime, was thinking hard. If I bought the puppy, I could be sure of having a faithful friend eventually, one who would tell no tales, and who would never ask, as the price of his confidence and affection, who I was, where I came from nor whether my papers were in order. On the other hand, I would have to take out a license for him and pay a tax—things obviously a dead man could not, or at least, should not, do. A first deliberate aggression, a first gratuitous restriction, however slight, upon my freedom!

"Twenty-five? What do you take me for?" I snapped at the old man.

I crammed my hat down over my eyes, turned up the collar of my coat, and hurried away. It was beginning to rain in a fine mist-like drizzle. "A great thing, this liberty of mine," I

muttered as I walked along; “but a bit of a tyrant, too, if it denies me the privilege even of buying a poor puppy out of its misery!”

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