

# The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 9 – Cloudy weather

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

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## The Late Mattia Pascal Chapter 9 Cloudy weather

Whether that first winter was a hard one or a mild one I am sure I do not know: I was too much absorbed in the excitement of traveling and in gloating over my new-found freedom. But this second one, frankly, was getting on my nerves. I was tired, I suppose, from being on the move so much, with the additional concern of keeping within a definite allowance. So that now if it was cold and damp, I knew that it was cold and damp; and, despite my struggles to keep my spirits free from the influence of the weather, a cloudy day would not fail to depress me.

“But it’s going to clear up, it’s going to clear up!” I would

assure myself. "Fortune is on your side—and the freedom you owe to her will not be long disturbed!"

To tell the truth I had seen enough of carefree idleness. Adriano Meis had had his youthful fling; now it was time for him to grow up, become a man, take hold of himself, find an even tenor of modest sensible living. Not so much of a problem, either, for a person entirely free, without a responsibility in the world!

So, at least, I thought; and I applied myself seriously to the question of selecting a town to fix my residence in—I could not go on hopping from one place to another, like a bird without a nest, if I ever intended really to settle down. Well where, then? A big metropolis, or some small center?

I could not make up my mind. I would shut my eyes and mentally review all the cities that I had visited, lingering in this square, on that street, among those scenes, which I could remember with greatest vividness and pleasure. And in each case, I would say:

"Yes, I was there once. And how much of life I am missing—life that lives its tense nervous course, here, there, in all its variety? How many times have I felt: 'Yes, I should like to spend the rest of my days, right here?' And how I have envied the people who did live in such places, with their habits and occupations adapted to those beautiful surroundings, free from the sense of transiency which always keeps the traveler ill at ease!"

This restlessness, this painful feeling of detachment, was my besetting torment, something that would never allow me really to be at home among the objects about me, or even to think of the bed on which I slept as really mine. Things, I believe, have value to us only in proportion as they have power for evoking and grouping familiar images about them. Certainly an object may sometimes be pleasing to us in itself, through its

artistic lines, let us say; but more often our delight in it comes from wholly extraneous considerations. Our fancy beautifies it with a halo, as it were, of fond remembrances, whereby we see it, not at all as it really is, but as something alive, as something animated by the images we habitually associate with it. What we love is that portion of ourselves which we recognize in it, which establishes a harmony between it and us, giving it a soul that is known only to us because that soul is the creation of our own memories.

Needless to say, I could never thus transform the atmosphere of the various hotel rooms in which I passed my nights. But a house, a home, a place that was really, wholly mine, could I hope ever to have one?

I had very little money to begin with. So make it a wee little house, just two or three rooms—but comfortable! Ought to be possible!—But, wait, not quite so fast! A number of things have to be thought of—very carefully weighed, indeed. Free, free as the wind that blows! Yes—but on one condition: your valise in your hand—today here, tomorrow there! You buy a house—settle down—and right away: deeds, public records, tax bills.—Your name in the directory? And on the voting lists? Of course! Well then—what name? An assumed name? And after that, what? ‘Who is that fellow?’ ‘Where did he come from?’ Secret investigations by the police! Trouble, in a word, annoyances—one thing leading to another! Out of the question then, a house, property of my own! Oh well—a furnished room, board in a private family! Why so wrought up over nothing?

It was winter—beastly weather—that set me thinking along such lines, the approach of the Christmas season, that always makes one long for a cozy corner by a hearth with the intimacy and warmth of a home about one.

Not that I missed the good cheer of my own family circle! The only home I ever thought of with any real regret was the one I had had before that, the old home of my father and

mother—destroyed long since, and not by anything connected with my recent change of status. I could console myself with the reflection that I would probably be no happier over the holidays, were I to spend them back in Miragno with my wife and—horrors!—my mother-in-law.

I treated myself to the pleasure of an imaginary return to them—a big loaf of nut bread under my arm:

“A knock on the door:

“‘Excuse me—do they live here still—Romilda Pescatore, widow Pascal, and Marianna Dondi, widow Pescatore?’

“‘Yes, and who is calling, may I ask?’

“‘Why, I am the late husband of Signora Pascal—you know, that fellow they found drowned in the Flume, a year or more ago. Thought I’d just drop in for a visit over the holidays—on leave from the other world, with permission, of course, from Higher Up. I’ll be going back soon, however!’

“Do you suppose the old woman would drop dead on seeing me walk in, like that? She drop dead? I should smile! I’d be the dead one—give her two days!”

No, the one real blessing, the one thing in my adventure that I could really be thankful for, was, I had to admit, my escape from my wife, from my mother-in-law, from my debts, from the humiliating afflictions of my former life. These, indeed, I had shaken off for good. Well then, what more could I ask for? And just consider: I had a whole, whole life before me! For the moment, to be sure—well, but there were plenty of people as lonely as I was!...

“Yes, but such people”—you see it was cloudy weather, and my spirits were low—“such people either are travelers abroad and have homes to go back to; or, if they haven’t, they can have if they choose (meantime going to see their friends). Whereas

I—I will always be like this, a stranger wherever I am—that's the difference. A stranger, a visitor forever in this life, Adriano Meis will be!"

Then I would get angry at myself and storm:

"Why this whimpering? Come, not so much fussing over little things. You have friends—or at least, you can have!"

Friends?

In the trattoria where I was taking my meals in those days, a man who sat at a table near by had shown himself disposed to make my acquaintance. He must have been something over forty—dark hair, what there was of it, gold eyeglasses that didn't like to stay put, perhaps because their chain (gold also) was so heavy. An amusing little chap, really! Just imagine: when he stood up and put on his hat, he looked like some boy dressed up as an old man. The trouble was with his legs, so short that when he sat down they didn't reach the floor. He never, you might say, rose from a chair—it was a case rather of slipping off it. He tried to mitigate this drawback by wearing high heels. Well, what of that? They did make a good deal of noise, those heels; but they gave a certain snap to his way of walking, quick little steps that made me think of a partridge running.

A solid person, besides, of some ability! A little testy, perhaps, and better as a talker than as a listener; but with original views on things, always his own point of view.... And he had a decoration.

He handed me his card one day: "Cavaliere Tito Lenzi."

I must say that this episode of the visiting card gave me quite a shock; for I imagined I must have cut a poor figure in not being able to return the courtesy. I had not as yet had any cards made—a certain self-consciousness I suppose, about putting my new name into print deliberately. All nonsense,

anyhow, such trifles! Why a visiting-card, pray? Say your name right out, and have done with it!

And so I did; but, as for telling the truth, my real name... well, you understand.

What a good talker Cavaliere Tito Lenzi was! He even knew Latin and he could quote Cicero like anything.

“One’s happiness comes from within? That’s not the whole story, my dear sir. Your own inner self is not sufficient as a guide. It might be if our spirit were a private castle and not, so to speak, a public square—if, that is, we could think of our Self as something quite apart from everything else, and if that Self were not, by its very nature, visible, perceptible to everybody. In the mind, as I think, there is, to put it differently, an essential relation—essential, notice—between me who do the thinking and the other beings whom I apprehend. Well then, I cannot be sufficient unto myself—do you follow me? So long as the feelings, the inclinations, the tastes of these people whom I have thus made a part of myself and you a part of yourself do not affect me and you, neither you nor I can be contented, happy, easy in our own minds; and so true is this that we work as hard as we can so that our own feelings, thoughts, interests, inclinations, may find some response in other people. And if we fail in this because—well, how shall we say?—because the atmosphere of the moment is not right for bringing the seed to fruition, the seed, my dear sir, of your ideas that you have planted in the minds of others, you cannot say that you are satisfied with your own inner life. How can you be? What’s it really amount to? Well yes, you can live all alone in the world—rot away in the sterile darkness around you! But is that enough? Listen, my dear sir, I hate fine phrases. To my mind they are so much pap to feed people unable to think for themselves. And here is one of them: ‘I am content if I am true unto myself!’ Cicero said something like that: ‘\_Mea mihi conscientia pluris est quam hominum

sermo\_. But Cicero—let us be quite frank—Cicero was a great one for big words with little meaning. The Lord deliver us from such! Worse than a beginner on the violin...!”

I could have hugged this delightful little old man, who could talk so charmingly; except that he did not always confine himself to the acute and often witty disquisitions of which I have given you a sample. He began to be more personal in his remarks; and just as I was thinking that our friendship was well and easily under way, I had occasion to feel some embarrassment and an obligation to hold off at a safe distance. So long as he did the talking and the conversation dealt with general subjects, everything went smoothly; but finally Cavaliere Lenzi wanted to hear from me.

“You are not from Milan, I gather.”

“No.”

“Just passing through?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting town, Milan!”

“Very!”

I must have sounded like a trained parrot. And the more he pressed me with his questions, the farther afield my answers took us. Before long I had landed in America. But the moment the Cavaliere learned that I was born in Argentina, he leapt from his chair and came over to shake my hand:

“Ah, Argentina! My heartiest congratulations, my dear sir! I envy you! America! America!... I have been there myself.”

“Time for me to be getting out of here,” I reflected uneasily. And then aloud:

“You have been there? Perhaps I ought to congratulate you,

rather; because, though I was born in Argentina, I can hardly say I was ever there. I was a few weeks old when they brought me away—so that my feet, you may say, never trod American soil!”

“What a pity,” exclaimed Cavaliere Lenzi sympathetically. “But I suppose you have relatives in those parts still?”

“None that I know of!”

“Oh, I see, your family came back to Italy for good. Where did you settle?”

I shrugged my shoulders:

“Why—we lived in various places—a short time here, a short time there, moving about a good deal. I have nobody left, at present. I see a good deal of the world!”

“How delightful! Lucky man, I must say. You just travel around? And nobody to look out for!”

“No one!”

“How delightful! Lucky man! I envy you!”

“I suppose you have a family?” I decided to ask, to veer the conversation back upon him.

“Unfortunately, no!” he sighed, knitting his brow. “I’m quite alone, as I have always been.”

“Your case then, is the same as mine!”

“And I can’t say that I like it, my dear sir,” he exclaimed. “I find life very dull. For me, all this loneliness ... well, in short, I’m tired of it. Oh, I have crowds of friends, of course; but, believe me, when you get to a certain age, you don’t like to go home, every day, to a house where you know you will find no one waiting for you. Well, after all—there are people who understand the game and there are people who



don't, my dear sir; and those who do come out worse, in the end, than the others. Saps your energy, your initiative, you see. It's this way: when you're really wise, you say: 'I mustn't do this,' or 'I mustn't do that—otherwise ... I'll be putting my foot in it.' Very well, you discover, sooner or later, that life itself means putting one foot in after another; and the man who never made a fool of himself is the man who never really lived; and there you are!"

"But you," I encouraged comfortingly, "you have time still."

"To make a mistake? Huh, my dear sir, as though I hadn't made many of them!" And he smiled mischievously. "You see, I've travelled, travelled a great deal, as you have, and as for adventures—well, lots of them and some most amusing. Listen, for example! At Vienna, one evening..."

And I was dumbfounded! Love affairs, that little old man? Three, four, five, Austria, France, Russia, even. Russia? And such affairs—one more spicy than the other, as he retailed them to me. It was sufficient to look at his absurd, his utterly insignificant person to know that he was lying; and at first I was mortified, ashamed, for him: surely he could not realize the effect that all his boastings really had on those who heard them. But then I got angry: here was this little fellow lying to me with the greatest zest and ease, and quite gratuitously, without needing to do so in the least; while I, who could not dispense with falsehood, who was, in fact, a living lie, felt my soul tortured every time I had to deceive someone.

But later I thought it over: if this agreeable little fellow took such pleasure in feeding me all this talk about imaginary love affairs, it was precisely because there was no reason for him to lie: he had almost a right to amuse himself in that way if he chose. Whereas with me it was a matter of constraint, an irksome, humiliating, debasing obligation. And what conclusion must I draw from the situation? Only one, alas: that I would

be condemned to falsehood eternally; that, therefore, I could never have a friend, a true friend; for friendship presupposes confidence; and how could I ever entrust to anyone the secret of this second life of mine; a nameless life without a past, a fungus sprouting from the presumptive suicide of the late Mattia Pascal? No, the best I could hope for would be casual, superficial relationships with my fellow humans, short exchanges of indifferent words on subjects that did not matter.

Well, again what of it? Little inconveniences incident to good fortune! Should I lose heart on account of them? By no means! I should go on living, as I had lived, by and for myself! Not a fascinating prospect, altogether, to be sure! My own company, good as it was, would still improve from a little variety!

Sometimes, passing my hands over my face and finding it beardless, or running them through my hair and finding it so long, or adjusting those strange blue glasses to my little nose, I would experience a curious bewilderment, as though it were not myself whom I was touching, as though I were no longer the man I always had been, pacing issues squarely, the truth was that all this new makeup was for other people, not for myself. Well then, why wear the mask in my own presence? And if all I had invented and imagined in connection with Adriano Meis was not for the benefit of other people, for whose benefit was it? For mine? But I could take it seriously, if at all, only providing others should take it seriously. Accordingly, if this Adriano Meis lacked the courage to lie, avoided people because he lacked that courage, went off by himself into hiding in his hotel (when, during those cloudy wintry days, he could no longer bear to see himself so much alone, on the streets of Milan) just to pass the time in company with the late Mattia Pascal—it was easy to see that things would go worse and worse with me, that a gloomy outlook lay ahead, that my great good fortune—well....

But I suppose the situation was really this: I was so absolutely free that it was difficult for me to bring myself to any particular kind of life. I would be on the point of making a decision, only to feel myself embarrassed, hampered, blocked by the many obstacles and uncertainties I would seem to perceive before me. So out I would go again upon the streets, watching everything, observing everything, pondering deeply on the least details; then, when I was tired, I would go into a cafe, look over the newspapers, and sit studying the people who went in and out—going out myself, in the end. Surely life, taken in this way, from the point of view, that is, of a spectator wholly disinterested in it, was something meaningless, purposeless, without rhyme or reason. I felt lost in that swirling throng of human beings. The noise and the ferment of the city deafened me, drove me to distraction.

“Why, oh why,” I would ask myself frantically, “why do men strive to make the mechanism of life so more and more complicated? Why all these banging, crashing machines? What will become of people when machines do everything for them? Will they then see that this so-called progress has nothing to do with happiness? From all these inventions with which science sincerely believes it is enriching humanity (really making us poorer because they cost so much) what satisfaction do we really get—even if we do admire them?”

In a street-car, the day before, I had met one of those individuals who cannot help telling their neighbors everything that comes into their heads; and he said to me:

“What a wonderful thing, these electric cars; for two cents I can go from one end of Milan to the other, and almost in as many minutes.”

All the poor man could see was the long ride he got for his two cents—oblivious to the fact that it was more than he could do to earn a living in that world of noise and uproar, for all its electric cars, electric lights, and electric everything.

And yet science seems to make life easier and more convenient. Granted that it really does, I can still ask: "What worse service can you do a human being than reduce a life that is stupid and not worth while to the perfection of mechanical ease?"

And I would be back in my hotel again.

In the window casing in one of the corridors a birdcage was hanging with a canary in it. Since I could not talk with people and had nothing else to do, I began a conversation with the bird. He brightened up when I imitated a few notes of his, and seemed really to understand that someone was talking to him—catching who knows what references to nests, and green leaves and freedom, in the sounds I made with my lips. He would hop about in the cage, turn around, stand on one leg, look at me crosswise, lower and raise his head, finally chirp an answer, or a question, and then listen again. Poor little bird! He understood me, though I did not know what I was saying to him.

Well, isn't that what happens to men, more or less? Don't we imagine that Nature talks to us? Don't we think we catch some meaning in her mysterious whispering—an answer, which we interpret in accord with our yearnings to the many earnest questions we put to her? And Nature, meantime, in her infinite grandeur, has not the remotest consciousness even that we exist.

Which illustrates the consequences the most idle diversion may have for a man condemned to his own society exclusively. I felt like boxing my own ears: was I so far gone as to be turning really into a philosopher? No, no, there was no logic in the kind of life I was trying to lead; and I could not stand it much longer! I would have to overcome my reticences, make a decision, whatever the cost! My problem, after all was to live, to live, to live!

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*Shakespeare Italia*