

Carola Prosperi: Reclaiming Her Visibility

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Abstract

Women, throughout history, have been frequently viewed as passive and represented as oppressed. Italian Fascism was not an exception. Benito Mussolini, the head of the Italian Fascist regime, wanted to recreate the greatness that was the Roman Empire, and one of the ways to do so was to control the population demographic. To do this, he ultimately needed to control women and their rights, both general and reproductive. Through numerous laws and amendments, Mussolini, with help from the Catholic Church, managed to ban contraceptives and make abortion illegal. Also, he made certain jobs illegal for women, forcing them to stay at home and play the role of the mother. Furthermore, through financial incentives and government institutions, Mussolini made it seem more appealing for women to stay at home and have children, than going out to work.

While it might seem like Mussolini's plan to increase population was foolproof, many women did not follow this agenda. Women continued having abortions illegally, and the population actually ended up decreasing, according to what scholar Lesley Caldwell brilliantly named a "Demographic Strike." While we as Americans have mostly been shown Italian women during Fascism as passive figures, thanks to recent academic research it is clear that this is not always the case. Women during Italian Fascism fought back, although not throughout a traditional feminist battle, since the feminist movement as it was known in pre-Fascist and Liberal Italy had been seriously undermined, but in a less overtly ideological and yet effective way. We can witness this effort of reclaiming one's body and mind through reading the stories and novels of many women writers of the time. One certain writer, Carola Prosperi, is an example of this. Although she did not consider herself to be a feminist writer, reading her stories

today, it is clear that she would be considered a feminist writer. While she was a predominant writer for newspapers like *La Donna* and *La Stampa*, she also wrote many novels regarding topics such as abortion and abusive relationships. In the collections of stories, *Felicità in Gabbia*, written in 1922, Prosperi gives a voice to oppressed women, showing their strength to make decisions regarding children and marriage. It is startling to see how, although she discussed such taboo topics from a very independent and unique point of view, she continued to be published steadily during Fascist times. We have to wonder if, in such a sense, women were indeed so “invisible” that not much attention was actually given to what they were writing, so much that they could, more easily than men, escape censorship. Although in recent times, more attention was given to Fascist women writers, I still feel that more work needs to be done, especially through translating many of the “invisible” and forgotten stories that could offer the American audience a much more complete perspective of the multi-faceted Fascist women society.

For these aforementioned reasons, I have decided to write my Honors Thesis on Women, Fascism, and Carola Prosperi. I will begin my thesis with an introduction, which will include information about Fascism in general, women and Fascist laws, and information on Carola Prosperi herself. Also, I will look into specific translation theories, and then elaborate on the theory that I used, as well as the problems that arose while translating the stories. Following the introduction, I will have a translation of three stories from Carola Prosperi's book, *Felicità in Gabbia*, named *Paternità*, *Mancanza di Serietà*, and *L'Oscura Passione*. I am choosing this book for many reasons, the first and most important being that it has never been translated into English before. Secondly, Prosperi's stories gave women the chance to say that they were not just sitting by and letting Mussolini take control of their world.

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Introduction

I think 'feminine literature' is an organic, translated writing... translated from blackness, from darkness. Women have been in darkness for centuries. They don't know themselves. Or only poorly. And when women write, they translate this darkness...Men don't translate. They begin from a theoretical platform that is already in place, already elaborated. The writing of women is really translated from the unknown, like a new way of communicating rather than an already formed language.

-- Marguerite Duras

My sophomore year of college, during the Italian 4010 seminar on translation, I realized what a powerful tool translations can be in order to change the perception of a certain culture. In Sherry Simon's book, *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*, she describes Homi Bhabha's theory of "translational culture," which is "a new site of cultural production."¹ What Bhabha is referring to is the idea that, by translating a piece of literature to a different language, there is a creation of a new type of culture, or, better said, the discovery of the culture that is being translated. In relation to translations, Simon elaborates, stating that translation can be used "as an activity which destabilizes cultural identities, and becomes the basis for new modes of cultural creation."² When the opportunity arose to write a thesis, I started thinking how my project could offer a contribution in clarifying some common misperceptions about Italy. Because, as Simon said, translation can lead to the creation of new cultures and understandings, I saw this thesis as an opportunity to do just that. Translation is a cultural practice, meaning that the product is influenced by the translator's experiences in a similar way to what occurs in the writing of history. Since most Italian social and political history has been written by men, about men, I feel that it is important to translate some women authors to

1 Homi K. Bhabha, "The Third Space," *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2003) 212.

2 Sherry Simon, *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 135.

implement the perspective of how women writers played an important subversive role during the Fascist era in Italy (1922 – 1945).

The experience that really brought my attention to the social aspects of Fascist Italy was watching Italian cinema as a teenager. My father grew up in Italy during the 60s and 70s and watched many classic Italian movies, such as *Roma Città Aperta* by Roberto Rossellini, *Il Giardino dei Finzi Contini* by Vittorio de Sica, and *Una Giornata Particolare* by Ettore Scola³. My father wanted me to experience Italy the way he had, and before I went abroad for my junior year of high school to Viterbo, Italy, he made me watch *Roma Città Aperta*. My eyes were instantly opened to a different world of hunger, violence, and fear. As an example of post-war cinema of the Neorealistic style, women in *Roma Città Aperta* are regarded as figures of the regenerated nation, specifically the character of Pina, played by Anna Magnani. Pina is the personification of Rome, disheveled and passionate. She is of working-class origins and living in fallen conditions. She is a single, unwed mother, and identifies with her community using her colloquial language. She is, in essence, everything that the Fascist regime did not want. Paradoxically, when I later read Carola Prosperi, Pina reminded me of some of her characters, such as Leila in *Beyond the Labyrinth* and Mrs. Costanza in *A Dark Paradise*, and I started to wonder if the portrait of women representing different values than those of the Fascist nation may have started well before the end of Fascism in 1945.

This film, although it may seem like merely an example of cinema in post-Fascist times, is a translation of Italian women into film through the eyes of the director. This type of translation, called a intersemiotic translation, or transmutation, is “an interpretation of verbal

3 *Rome, Open City, The Garden of the Finzi Contini's, and A Special Day*. TRANS.

signs by means of signs of non-verbal sign systems.”⁴ While most people might think of a translation being a transcription from one language to another, it can also be the interpretation of an idea to a different type of media, such as the translation of women of Fascist Italy to a non-propaganda type film. The choice to translate these ideas into a film was made for the exact same reason that I chose to translate a piece of feminist literature from Fascist Italy: it gives a larger audience of people the chance to understand a certain subject that might be foreign to them. By making knowledge available through media such as films, or through translations of text to a more commonly spoken language, there is a translation of cultural values that can, as stated above, help shed light on common misperceptions about certain societies and peoples.

4 Jeremy Munday, Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications (New York: Routledge, 2008) 5.

I. Historical Background

The 1945 film by Roberto Rossellini, *Roma Città Aperta*, opened my eyes to the Italian reality of the late war period and the fact that Italy did, in fact, suffer a great deal during Fascist times. In High School, we had only ever been taught of Italian Fascism as the “little brother” of the German National Socialism party. Now, when I think about this I can not understand why some teachers would underplay the role of Fascism in history and decide to not offer the younger generation a better perspective about the dictatorship of Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini (1883 – 1945) and his role in leading Italy into the Second World War. Furthermore, if teachers did decide to discuss Fascism, they discussed politics and the actions of men, not anything about the role of women. Not only did Mussolini, also known as *Il Duce*, condone warfare and colonization in other countries, specifically Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia, he also supported the killing of many political figures and supporters, the eradication of free press, and the oppression of women.

Fascism in Italy began as a movement during the early 1900s as an attempt to regain prestige and power that existed during the time of the Roman Empire. After World War I, Italy was economically and politically in shambles. Due to the disastrous effects on the country as a result of World War I, Italy did not have a widespread nationalism or view of a positive future. Because Italy was trying to enter into a post-war economic race with the United States, the collapse of the Lira was devastating to Italy as a nation as well as to the popularity of the government. Clearly, Italy was not in a stable state. The idea of Fascism took hold was able to gain popularity and power easily.

While the rise of Fascism and Mussolini was originally seen as a positive change for

Italian society, it can be seen now that Fascism, while promising change and surplus, did not do anything of the sort. Just on the surface, Fascism banned rival political parties; imprisoned and drove into exile other political leaders; and killed between 2,000-3,000 political opponents. Furthermore, the Fascist party destroyed the free press; liquidated non-Fascist trade; infringed on the law; sponsored a secret police; bribed Italians to spy and report on their friends, neighbors and family; and reinstated patriarchal practices in a largely matriarchal society.⁵

⁵ R.J.B. Bosworth, Mussolini's Italy: Life Under the Fascist Dictatorship, 1915 – 1945 (Boston: Penguin, 2007) 1-2.

II. Women and Mussolini

Although it can be seen that Mussolini's main threat was from those deemed "enemies of the state", such as Jews and people of different races, it can also be seen that Mussolini concerned himself with the role of women in Italian society. As stated earlier, one of the goals of Italian Fascism was to reinstate a patriarchal society, which in addition to changing the role of men meant putting restrictions on women, their freedoms of speech and ability to work, as well as restrictions concerning childbirth and motherhood. Due to the elevation of the importance of family, women were faced with the extreme anti-feminist nature of Italian Fascism, which led to severe rules and regulations enacted to control women in every way, shape, and form. To society, a woman was presented first and foremost as a mother, not as someone with equal political and economical opportunity. Fascist propaganda tried to remediate this loss of power by conveying motherhood as a joyful and worthwhile experience, that would overall not only be enriching the life of the mother herself, but also helping the general good of the regime. Furthermore, propaganda of the time insisted that it was a woman's "duty and responsibility" to be a mother, and the only way to do this was putting motherhood as their only goal in life, leaving education and occupation by the wayside. Motherhood was defined as "the physical act of making babies,"⁶ and their "rights in the workplace, their contributions to culture, and their service as volunteers were called into question by the official message that their permanent duty was to bear the nation's children."⁷ This idea was also carried out in the demand that women not be elegant, for a woman who dresses in a more humble and ordinary way is viewed as more prolific. While women of today might find it strange that so many women listened to such words, the Fascist

6 Marcia Landy, Italian Film (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000) 11.

7 Victoria De Grazia, How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy 1922-1945 (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992) 72.

regime made it very worthwhile for women to have children via material gains. There were financial incentives, as well as the creation of child-care centers to help mothers focus on being the bountiful caretaker for the household.

Italian Fascist social propaganda was not the only force behind the idea of women as mothers. The Catholic Church only strengthened Fascist policy by supporting their doctrine with biblical background. Because the Catholic tradition predated the Fascist regime, the Catholic endorsement of the agenda for women only helped coerce women more. Furthermore, the Church's position within Fascist policy was affirmed with the Lateran Pacts in 1929, which reaffirmed the agreement made in the Statute of the Kingdom of Italy in 1848, saying "the Catholic Apostolic Roman Religion is the only religion of the State."⁸ This statement granted the Church a considerable amount of freedom, since it held such a privileged position within Italian society. The Church's presence as the only external support system for many families, via welfare networks, made the Church an institution in the daily lives of many families, which helped in the broadcasting of its views.

One of the Fascist's goals in Italy was to create a pure race, and to do so, they created something of a demographic campaign starting in 1922, developing further in the 1930s. Mussolini, in his Ascension Day speech on May 26, 1927, set a target population for the country of 60 million by 1950⁹, and thus a number of rules and stipulations were put in place to make sure that the goal was reached. The first part of the demographic plan was to stress the importance of marriage. The Fascist party believed that, by promoting the importance of family and marriage, the birth rate was going to increase. Mussolini's government decided to make

8 Benito Mussolini and Pietro Gasparri, Lateran Treaty of 1929 (Rome, 1929) Article 1. 5 Feb. 2013. <http://www.aloha.net/~mikesch/treaty.htm>

9 Lesley Caldwell, "Reproducers of the Nation: Women and the Family in Fascist Policy" Rethinking Italian Fascism: Capitalism, Populism and Culture (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986) 116.

marriage more appealing by placing a series of incentives on the population, both negative and positive. First, Mussolini placed a two part tax on single, unmarried men between the ages of 25 and 65. The first part of this was a yearly tax based on age, and the second was a tax of 25% percent of their total yearly income, with few exceptions.¹⁰ Furthermore, the law of June, 1929 gave men with children public employment at the central and local level, as well as the opportunity for cheap subsidized housing.¹¹ Also, the Italian government followed suit with Nazi Germany's idea of marriage loans. The general idea was that the loans were only available to couples under the age of 26, and would not require repayment until six months after marriage, or an extra 18 months if the wife was pregnant. What's more, if the wife continued to have children, the debt was cancelled completely¹².

Not only was there incentive to marry, there were also numerous incentives to produce more children and create a large family. The definition of "large family" varied based on profession: while state employees had to have a family of seven or more dependent children to be considered large, most families had to consist of 10 or more dependent children, or 12 born children with six still dependent upon the family. For large families there were tax exemptions and material assistance from the local government. School taxes were waved, and a family allowance was allocated to certain state employees with large families in 1929.¹³

10 Ibid., 117

11 Ibid., 119

12 Ibid., 118

13 Ibid., 119

III. The Role of Women Writers

At the time of selecting my topic of my Honor Thesis, I realized that I always understood due to films and literature I had seen and read, that women during Mussolini's dictatorship were oppressed, but I wanted to understand how and why. By reading Robin Pickering-Iazzi, *Unspeakable Women: Selected Short Stories Written by Italian Women During Fascism*, I started to realize how the complexities and ambiguities of Mussolini's politics towards women were represented in women writers' short stories. While their role may have been undervalued, women writers played an important role within Fascism, and often their stories are striking, passionate, and worthy of study. The short stories written on the Third Page (*Terza Pagina*) of the *Corriere della Sera* by Maria Luisa Astaldi, Grazia Deledda, Ada Negri, Amalia Guglielminetti, Pia Rimini, and Marinella Lodi, help us understand the connections between regime policy and the attitudes and actions of female citizens in Italy.¹⁴ As Yarkin writes,

Women's short stories gave voice to the issues common to female experience in modern Italy under the rule of Mussolini's regime. Because women's critical short stories appeared frequently on the cultural pages of Italy's newspapers and enjoyed popularity there, the themes and issues around which the stories revolve offer us valuable insight into the ways that women questioned and opposed the regime.¹⁵

However, the Fascist regime was not just concerned with oppressing women via the law. It also tried to establish a national organization dedicated to the health and well-being of mothers and children in Italy. The *Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia* (National Agency for Maternity and Childhood, ONMI) was established in 1925 in order to help control and restore morality in mothers. It focused on the family and children as the basic unit of society, and in turn the nation, as well as functioning as a type of supervision of children of families using the welfare

¹⁴ Genna Yarkin, "Her and Yet Not Her" *Women Authors Questioning Mussolini's Fascist Regime on the 'Terza Pagina' of Italy's Newspapers, 1925-1936* (Bryn Mawr, 2011) 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3

institution. Because there was an ever increasing trend to have multiple pregnancies due to high rates of infant mortality and death in childbirth, ONMI also served as a body that helped improve the conditions of the women of Italy, with both their physical and moral health.¹⁶

While it might seem that the ideas and propaganda on how families should be run were coming directly from the government and the Church, the family organization and dynamic was traditionally controlled by the mother of the household. Not every woman during Fascist times sat back and watch the new ideas unfold. Marcia Landy states that “every aspect of a woman's every day life – her growing up, role in the family, child rearing, use of leisure time, work, forms of organizing, role in the war effort, and later role in resisting Fascism – presents a checkered story of involvement in, and even in conflict with, the regime, not a seamless and unified picture.”¹⁷ While the greater public and those in power might have wanted the people of the time, as well as people now, to think that all Italian women were complacent and accepting of the regime's thoughts about the role of women, it is simply not true, and that is precisely why Mussolini realized that the only way to implement his policies was by trying, in every way, to influence the woman in the family.

It could be seen that the head of the Fascist Regime, Benito Mussolini, had only one, unwavering stance regarding women. However, history proves that his opinion was impressionable and ambiguous. As seen above, the messages coming from popular culture were already ambiguous, and only became more ambiguous when Mussolini made it illegal in 1923 for women to be “heads of middle schools...teach history, philosophy or economics in the grammar schools (*licei*) or technical institutes [and they were excluded from a] variety of courses

16 Caldwell, 129

17 Landy, 11

of specialization, not only in teaching.”¹⁸ Because wages were so low to begin with, men avoided these jobs, leaving them to women. However, what Mussolini did not recognize right away was that this law would require women to move away to teach in locations that were less populated and less likely to have teachers already. The migration to more rural areas provided women the exact opportunity that Mussolini did not want: they could become independent, both emotionally and financially; move away from the control of their patriarchal families; and be relieved of the pressure to bear children.

In Maria Luisa Astaldi's story, *Fog*, women's education is showcased in a negative light, just as Mussolini had intended. In the story, Miss Lucia is a young tutor for a family near Milan and is not yet married. Everyone around her constantly reminded her that she needed to marry to become a respectable woman, yet she still refused. After a long winter, she did not return to tutor, and the family goes to search for her, only to find that she was hit by a truck during a bout of thick fog. When they inquired as to how she had died, the warehouseman of the town said that she had invited many people to her house to inform them that she was leaving to get married in Milan. When she left in her white wedding dress, the truck was unable to see her in the thick fog and struck her. To explain it more clearly, the warehouseman says “it was, like they say, something you'd read in a novel. We found piles of books in her house. She read so much she ruined her brain. Because women aren't like us. Books are bad for them.”¹⁹ This quote showcases the general sentiment toward women of the time: they were not to be educated, because they were too fragile to handle what books could tell them. This directly relates to what Mussolini wanted to prevent by forbidding women to teach certain subjects in schools. By preventing them

18 Caldwell, 125-6

19 Maria Luisa Astaldi, “Fog” 1936 *Unspeakable Women* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1993) 57.

from teaching complex subjects, he would also prevent them from studying them on their own, and thus protecting their delicate minds from insanity.

In Victoria De Grazia's book, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945*, she examines Mussolini and his regime's stance toward women, stating that “the Duce's regime fell back on the traditional authority of family and religion to enforce biologically determined roles as mothers and caretakers...[his] laws relegating women to the home, and their public cult of motherhood in the name of building national-state power were similar enough to justify speaking of a common fascist politics toward women.”²⁰ While it might seem clear from this quote that Mussolini was staunchly trying to relegate women to do his bidding, and “returning women to home and hearth, restoring patriarchal authority, and confining female destiny to bearing babies,” she also realizes just how ambiguous Mussolini's opinions were as a result of other laws and comments made regarding women.²¹ While it is clear that the idea to demote and demoralize women was in the forefront, it was also clear that a certain part of the Fascist dictatorship wanted to “celebrate the *Nuova Italiana*,” or the New Italian Woman. She continues, saying,

(...) on one hand, fascists condemned all the social practices customarily connected with the emancipation of women – from the vote and female participation in the labor force to family planning. They also sought to extirpate the very attitudes and behaviors of individual self-interest that underlay women's demands for equality and autonomy. On the other hand, fascism, in an effort to build up national economic strength and to mobilize all of Italian society's resources – including the capacity of women to reproduce and nurture – inevitably promoted some of the very changes it sought to curb. Mobilizing politics, modernizing social services, finally, the belligerent militarism of the 1930s, all had the unintended effect of undercutting conservative notions of female roles and family styles. In the process, fascist institutions ordained new kinds of social involvement and recast older notions of maternity and fatherhood, femaleness and masculinity. As in other areas of society, the dictatorship claimed to be restoring the old, when, in spite of itself, it established much that was new.²²

By trying to deny women their civil rights and opportunities, yet trying to give them any comfort

20 De Grazia, xi

21 Ibid., 1

22 Ibid., 2

and support to help the growth of the nation and Fascist doctrine, was a contradictory stance. Further, by re-writing the social scripts on the roles of men and women, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, Mussolini gave more power to women than he intended. He gave women the opportunity to be the head of the family, since they were the ones producing and raising the sons and daughters of the Fascist empire. They were the new faces of the Fascist regime, and could chose to do as they pleased, regardless of what Mussolini desired.

Initially, Mussolini had hoped that, although he was re-establishing the patriarchal society, women would be the main force for establishing fascist morals within the family, since they were the ones who were always at home with their children and rearing as members of the Fascist party. However, he did not realize that some of the laws and institutions he put in place would allow women to develop their own opinions and create intellectual resistance to the regime. Thinking that women were a passive and invisible force in his favor, Mussolini did not expect to aid the development of some of the most active anti-Fascist activists during his rule. By offering this historical background, it will be easier to understand Carola Prosperi's ideas and intentions in her writing, as well as the legacy she now leaves behind, and what we can learn from it as modern readers.

IV. Carola Prosperi

Carola Prosperi (1883 - 1981), the author whose work I selected to translate, was a writer from Turin, in the north of Italy. She held a degree in Elementary Education, and taught at the Niccolò Tommaseo school in Turin. After teaching, she wrote for newspapers and magazines such as *La Donna* and *La Stampa* in Turin. She started writing fables and children's stories in the *Gazzetta del Popolo*, such as *L'ochina nera*, *Coda di topo*, and *Reucci e fatine al chiaro di luna*²³. After her initial success, she continued to write novels such as *La profezia*, *La paura di amare*, e *La felicità in gabbia*²⁴. Her first notable success came with the novel, *La paura di amare*, for which she won the Rovetta literary prize. Before the end of her life in 1981 at age 98, she had authored more than 35 novels.

Prosperi was a very prolific writer for her time, which would lead one to believe that she would be equally as well known in Italy as in other countries today. However, when looking into previous translations of her work, I found that only four of her books and short stories had been translated into English.²⁵ Furthermore, there are only very few critical articles regarding her works of literature, and many were written in the 1990s, as seen in the compilation of essays on Prosperi titled *Carola Prosperi, Una Scrittrice Non "Femminista"*. While doing my research, it appeared that there were no critical essays written about her work, or even about her life in general, during the Fascist period. Also, aside from the previously mentioned book, it was difficult to find any other type of critical references on Prosperi. It seemed odd that there could be such little information on such an active and prolific writer, either in Italian or in English. She was a steadfast, although not consciously feminist, writer in a time of female oppression, writing

23 *The Black Goose, The Mouse Tail, and Reucci and the Fairies in the Moonlight* TRANS.

24 *The Prophecy, The Fear of Loving, and Caged Happiness*. TRANS.

25 *Beyond the Labyrinth* in Robin Pickering-Iazzi's *Unspeakable Women* (1993), *Passions and Pinpricks* (Elaine A. Wood, 1924), *The Second Love* (year unknown), *Il fanciullo feroce* (1921)

about topics that were illegal or highly frowned upon by both the regime and the Catholic Church, yet she continued to try to have her voice heard by the public regardless.

Carola Prosperi continued to publish for *La Stampa* throughout her life. It is clear, however, that, while she was an active woman writer, due to her prevalence in the newspapers of Turin, she was also “invisible” in a certain sense. While her pieces were published regularly, there is the question of just how much people were actually reading them, and even more, how they 'translated' the message contained in some of these stories. Because women in Italy have been viewed as the lesser gender for years, the people reading these stories might have thought her opinion was worthless or invalid, or simply labeled her stories as 'romance'. Because she was a woman writer, the ideas that she broadcast to the world, no matter how taboo or anti-Fascist, were overlooked and viewed as pointless banter. While this may seem like something negative, it is this oversight that allowed Prosperi to continue writing and have her ideas become cemented in history for the readers of today to interpret and engage.

Because the Catholic Church was such a central force in Italian culture, it dictated all ways of life, including appropriate topics of discussion and discourse. Even before laws were enacted under Mussolini making activities such as abortion illegal, the Catholic Church had made their opinion on the matter clear, stating that abortion was against the will of God and the Holy Scripture. Also, topics such as sex before marriage, prostitution, and spousal abuse had been judged as immoral by the Church well before the government had given their official opinion on the matters. Because of this, Carola Prosperi was, in theory, restricted when it came to topics that she could respectfully write about within the public eye. However, this did not stop Prosperi from writing numerous short stories and novels revolving around the difficult topics.

What it did affect, however, was the amount of attention she received. As we will see later, Prosperi, although she was a prolific, popular, and very active writer during Italy's Fascist era, was not recognized and seriously valued by literary critics during her time. Because of her choices to write about topics that were not considered “moral” by the Church, and thus the country in general, and by not complying with the 'fantasy' representation of women as devoted mothers and wives, which was the only representation Mussolini accepted, she was overlooked and disregarded by literary critics. Other writers, such as Grazia Deledda, who won the Nobel Prize in 1926²⁶, and Ada Negri, who won the Premio Mussolini in 1931²⁷, were recognized and praised by the Fascist government for their writing. Even though they have been grouped into the same category of “women writers of Fascism”, they clearly were more visible than Prosperi, in part due to their writing style and choice of topics for their work. Even in their case, it is evident that the regime chose to disregard some of the most interesting and potentially subversive stories of these writers. In fact, from the beginning of her career, Deledda found herself to be concerned with women's issues, and “she believed in divorce and women's suffrage, and she abhorred forced marriages.”²⁸ Clearly, these beliefs and ideals did not follow the Fascist “New Woman” fantasy, yet she was still rewarded for her writing that remained neutral.

I offer a few examples of how Carola Prosperi's short stories can be interpreted as originally “subversive” towards the laws and the policies implemented by Mussolini. In *Beyond the Labyrinth*, translated and published by Robin Pickering-Iazzi, we can see how the protagonist chooses to rebel against the idea of marriage and motherhood as the only possible true “realization” of a woman's destiny. In this story, a young professional woman, Leila, who has

26 “Grazia Deledda” *Cronologia* 5 Mar. 2013 <<http://cronologia.leonardo.it/storia/biografie/deledda.htm>>.

27 “Ada Negri” *Italian Donna: Il Portale Delle Donne* 5 Mar. 2013
<<http://www.italiadonna.it/public/percorsi/biografie/f076.htm>>

28 Yarkin, 23

been engaged for three years, is pushed by her shallow fiance, Adriano, to ask her parents to do their duty and give her the money she deserves so that the couple can finally get married. Leila, who has a steady job at the local cotton mill, a diploma in bookkeeping, and lives in a rented room in the town, attempts to ask her parents for money, yet fails to do so. She suddenly realizes that she is happy on her own, without a man or husband, particularly one who tries to blackmail her into doing things against her will and who is trying to shame her into doing so, saying “if they don't want to give you anything, threaten them with the possibility that our engagement might be called off. After all, they ought to think about how lucky it is that along the way you happened to meet a person like me...”²⁹ She discovers that being single actually led her “beyond the labyrinth”. She enjoys being independent, earning her own money and choosing where to spend it, whether it is on herself or caring for her aging parents. This story, written in 1929, highlights the then modern idea that women did not need to be marry to be happy or successful, which is directly against Mussolini's demographic campaign. Having seen how her parents fell in love foolishly, which resulted in the “fickle young man” (her father) falling in love with another woman, Leila decides her and Adriano's “points of view are too different for us to continue to stay together” and calls off the engagement.³⁰ This modern take on marriage is something striking for its time. Most people viewed marriage as a social necessity and political requirement, and Mussolini's laws made it seem that way as well. However, in this case we see someone who takes happiness and love into account over the necessity of marriage. Further, we see that, because women were able to be employed and live independently, they were experiencing less and less the need to have a husband by their side, which is completely against the Fascist

29 Carola Prospero, “Beyond the Labyrinth” 1929 Unspeakable Women (New York: The Feminist Press, 1993) 48.
30 Ibid., 51

doctrine and the demographic campaign.

To help further the creation of large families in Italy in a time of declining birth rates, the Fascist regime decided to do away with contraception and abortion. In 1931, the Penal Code was edited to incorporate a section titled *Delitti contro l'intergrità e la sanità della stirpe* (Crimes against the wholeness and health of the race). In Article 553, titled “Incitement to Practice Against Procreation”, states that whoever promotes or advertises anything against procreation (i.e. contraceptives) shall be sentenced to prison for up to one year, as well as given a fine of up to 4,000 *lire*.³¹ Furthermore, Articles 545, 551, and 555, made abortion a criminal offense, punishable by two to five years in prison both for the woman receiving the abortion and the person performing it.³² However, these sanctions did not stop abortions. Even though the statistics regarding abortion include information on miscarriages, *Maternità ed Infanzia*, a journal published by ONMI in 1942, stated that there were even higher frequencies of abortions, up to 20%, in comparison to other types of measures like contraception.³³ While the banning of contraceptives and abortion was put into place to directly influence the falling birth rate, it was also denying women the legal right to make their own choices about their well-being and their body. Since all kinds of family planning and medical services for women had been opposed by the government, women were forced to either treat themselves, or seek out a secretive clinic. In 1936, a study showed that out of 50 women who had abortions, only 10 of them did not suffer permanent damage to their reproductive organs.³⁴

The problem of unwanted maternity and abortion is reflected in one of Prosperi's most

31 “Titolo X: Dei delitti contro la integrità e la sanità della stripe” *Libro Secondo Dei Delitti in Particolare* 5 Feb. 2013 <<http://www.altalex.com/index.php?idnot=36772>>.

32 Caldwell, 121

33 Ibid., 121

34 Ibid., 121

striking stories, and one that I chose to translate for my project: *Fatherhood*. It is worth noticing how, even in the title, Prosperi is making of sort of anti-regime statement. While Mussolini is pushing the idea of a nation founded on the importance of “motherhood”, her story is called “fatherhood” and is actually the story of an unwanted and failed pregnancy. In this story, we see a young man who receives a parcel containing the remains of his aborted child. While this is already a disturbing image for anyone, either in the past or today, what is interesting about this story is the reaction of Paolo Gavini, the main character and father of the child. Obviously, he is shaken, just as anyone would be, but his main concern is what people around him will think if they discover the parcel in his jacket pocket. The story examines shame. The issue of shame does not arise from his lover's abortion, the shame arises more from his being involved in the act of disposal of the fetus. In fact, towards the end of the story, the young man starts believing in a delirium that *he* was the one who killed the child in the end, not the abortion. This “epiphany” is not that far from the truth, since it was his inadequacy in coming through as a “father” that led the woman to have an abortion. Similar to the character Adriano, that we met in the story *Beyond the Labyrinth*, Paolo is also a very shallow, cowardly, and selfish man, different from the “fantasy” of virility that Mussolini was trying to promote as the national image of the Italian man. This story also helps us understand that, even with Mussolini's attempts to force the growth of the Italian population, people viewed abortion and parenthood as more of a dramatic and personal social issue, instead of a governmental one.

In her book, *Felicità in gabbia*, written in 1922, Prosperi addresses extremely taboo topics for a Fascist era such as abortion and domestic abuse, topics which were ignored by the Fascist government. By exposing her opinions behind these subjects, Prosperi was able to give a

voice to women who were being silenced by an oppressive government, and show the world that women were not submitting to the Fascist regime.

While she did not consider herself a feminist writer, many of Prosperi's books discussed topics such as loveless marriages, female unhappiness, abortions, and domestic abuse. Her view of these topics, particularly feminine power and control and women's ability to make decision regarding their future selves, would, in today's terms, make her a staunch feminist. This can be seen clearly in some of her short stories. In *Fatherhood*, for example, the woman is in complete control of the relationship, even deciding whether or not to abort a child.

Prosperi's novels and short stories investigate the power struggle between women and men, with some reflecting upon the innate strength of women, and others speaking to the animalistic power that men held over their wives, as in *The Dark Passion*. In the next two stories I chose to translate, *A Lack of Seriousness* and *The Dark Passion*, Prosperi speaks more about the dangers of women being weak and correctly following the Fascist ideal of passivity and dependance upon men.

The debate of power and women versus men is prevalent in the stories I translated below. Earlier, we saw that Pina from *Roma Città Aperta* was my vision of the strong, Italian woman, but in Prosperi's stories, that image is questioned. In the first story, *Fatherhood*, the strength of Irma is never debated. She is an independent woman, who can decide to exact her revenge against Paolo by aborting their child and giving him the unborn fetus. She makes her own money, by whatever means that may be, and is viewed as a separate entity, not just an accessory to a man. The next two stories, *A Lack of Seriousness* and *The Dark Passion*, Prosperi speaks more to the dangers of women being weak and following the Fascist ideal that women be passive

and dependent upon men. In *A Lack of Seriousness*, Augusta, who was once lively and happy, is beat down by her husband and his family to become one of them, quiet and complacent. Because she did not stand up for her self and become an independent woman, she let herself be taken over by negativity and abuse, which drives her to become insane at the end of the story when she loses her child. In *The Dark Passion*, Elena is rescued from an abusive relationship by her mother, a widow who has had all three of her daughters abandon her, leaving her with a young grandchild. However, after spending time at home with her mother, Elena decides to return to her monster of a husband because, as a woman, it is her duty. In both of these stories, Prospero is speaking to the age old tradition in Italy of a woman being nothing without a man. Even if the husband, or the husband's family, is physically and mentally abusive, the woman must change to appease him, as it is her job as a woman to make her husband happy and carry his children, no matter what the circumstance. It is only in the last story that we see a reaction that calls out as a warning to women in Italy at the time. Mrs. Costanza, Elena's mother, at the end insults Elena by calling her a *femmina*, or female, which may not seem like an insult to us today, but what she is really referencing is the dependency that Elena has developed and the need that she feels to forgoes her own happiness and well-being for that of her husband, as well as the instinctual part of Elena that returns to dependency. In all, these stories convey a certain message of what Prospero viewed a strong Italian woman to be: an independent and confident woman who was able to make their own decisions regarding their own lives and prosperity, regardless of their profession or marital status.

From the descriptions of the three stories, this was a complex translation experience due to the subject matter. Prospero's writing style is very direct and descriptive, writing in sometimes

Decadent style, especially when it comes to descriptions of physical features and personality traits³⁵. While the topics might be morally complex, Prosperi writes in a very clear and precise way, leaving out extraneous details and opinions. Prosperi lets you read her story and then contemplate her point of view, which is only subtly apparent in the stories themselves.

Furthermore, the stories leave you thinking about what *you* would have done in the position of the protagonist, especially in *Fatherhood* and *The Dark Passion*. By narrating as an omniscient narrator, we are able to understand exactly what the protagonist is thinking, and experience it through the eyes of the narrator just as he or she is experiencing it, letting us get the full intimacy of the story and relate it to our own lives. That said, Prosperi also writes in such a style that can be applied to any time period, regardless of the small details such as personal belongings or stylistic changes. Her topics are universal and always prevalent in society, which lends to a universal feeling to the story, transcending time and cultures.

35 Note: The Italian Decadent style, or *Decadentismo*, was a literary movement that began in France in the 1880s. Though viewed as a degeneration of Romanticism, an early movement, it became very popular in Italy, especially with writers such as Grazia Deledda. Its stylistic characteristics include musicality, free verse, synesthesia, and in-depth descriptions. The topics that are usually addressed are neurosis, illness, depression, death, morbid sensuality, and the femme fatal. ("Decadentismo" Encyclopedia of Italian Literary Studies. (New York: Routledge 2007) 579)

V. Translation Theories

Because of the seminar I took on translation in my sophomore year, it was impossible for me to translate Prosperi's stories without thinking about what specific translation theories I was using or referencing. I also began thinking about how I would go about changing the American perspective of the Italian woman through this translation. Would I be able to convince English speaking populations through Prosperi's stories that Italian women weren't exactly what Mussolini wanted us all to believe? Would I be able to avoid adding my own personal opinion regarding topics that I am very passionate about? Upon finishing my translation, I was able to delve deeper into my own personal theory, and discover where my influences had come from.

Throughout history, there have been many different theories and concepts concerning translation and the translation process. In the mid-19th century, Madame de Staël was an advocate for translation in a time that translation was “increasingly denigrated as a derivative and non-productive activity.”³⁶ For de Staël, “a well-made translation can procure “familiar and intimate pleasure,” and can “more efficiently than any other means, keep a literature from falling into the banality which is a sure sign of decadence.”³⁷

During my translation efforts, I focused on creating my own method and how it relating it to the theories of translation that I had studied in my seminar on Translation. I originally began translating the piece by following Carlo Izzo's idea of the “humble translator”, a translator that has “an attitude of humility and discretion towards the original text. The translator, in order to leave room for the author of the foreign text, must disappear and become invisible.”³⁸ However, I quickly found out that writing such a direct translation that I had originally planned to write was

36 Simon, 63

37 Madame De Staël, *Oeuvres complètes de Madame la Baronne de Staël-Holstein* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1844) 294

38 Massimiliano Morini, *La Traduzione: Teorie. Strumenti. Pratiche*. (Milan: Sironi Editore, 2007) 25.

impossible. I had to be a somewhat visible translator in order for the translation to flow and read well in English, and to convey the subtlety of the message.

I focused on two prominent translators: Lawrence Venuti (1953 -) and Alexander Fraser Tytler (1747 - 1813). Although both of these men wrote in very different times, hundreds of years apart from each other, I believe that their critiques and comments on the theories of translation are still valid to translation practices today. Lawrence Venuti is known for his idea of keeping the translator visible, as to help keep the culture of the original work intact. While I might not believe in the idea of being visible as a translator, as I made a point to be as invisible as possible during my translation, I do agree with Venuti's reasoning, which is to prevent the domestication of the text. The domestication of the text would ignore the original host culture and replace it with "domestic agendas, cultural, economic, political."³⁹ To avoid this, I made sure to ignore any political or social agendas that exist in the United States or in Italy today. Because I was dealing with such taboo topics, such as abortion and domestic abuse, both of which are political, cultural, and social issues in this day and age, it was very important to let the text speak for itself, and remain invisible as a translator when it came to my own opinions or the opinions of my government regarding these subjects.

However, it was important to ensure that the political sentiments of the time were clear in these stories, since these repressive laws and ideas were the impetus behind the stories of Carola Prosperi. For example, in the story *Fatherhood*, it was important to really emphasize Paolo's feelings about the aborted fetus that he was now in possession of. He felt uneasy, as if he was breaking the law. He was constantly preoccupied with what the people around him would think if

³⁹ Lawrence Venuti "Translation as Cultural Politics: Regimes of Domestication in English" 1993 Translation – Theory and Practice (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006) 547.

they knew what he had in his jacket pocket and what his past was with this woman of the night. While these might also be the feelings and thoughts of a man in the same situation today, it is clear that the general population viewed abortion as an intensely negative and dirty act, which is important to understand when reading this story from today's perspective.

During the translation process I also used Alexander Fraser Tytler's "Three General Laws or Rules" as a guideline. The three rules, "the translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work; the style and manner of writing should be of the same character with that of the original; and the translation should have all the ease of the original composition"⁴⁰ outline the three principles I tried to follow while translating. Firstly, I did not change the ideas or original sense of the story at all during the translation. Also, I did not change the writing style of Carola Prosperi in the translation. While it was difficult, which will be further explained below, and few changes were made, her general descriptive style as well as her voice as a writer was not changed in the English translation. Lastly, with my edits and minimal additions, allowed the "ease of the original composition" to be maintained, leading to a fluid and readable translation.

Another translator I looked into while working was Étienne Dolet (1509 – 1546) and his Five Principles:

1. The translator must perfectly understand the sense and material of the original author, although he should feel free to clarify obscurities
2. The translator should have a perfect knowledge of both SL and TL, so as not to lessen the majesty of the language.
3. The translator should avoid word-for-word renderings
4. The translator should avoid Latinate and unusual forms
5. The translator should assemble and liaise words eloquently to avoid clumsiness⁴¹

While Dolet makes strong points, and I did follow the spirit of his principles, such as avoiding

40 Alexander Fraser Tytler, *Essay on the Principles of Translation* 1790, 27, qtd. in Jeremy Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2008)

41 Étienne Dolet, *La Manière de Bien Traduire d'une Langue en Aultre* 1540, 27, qtd. in Jeremy Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2008)

word-for word rendering and attempting to avoid clumsiness, I must disagree with some of his assertions. His first principle, the idea that the translator must “perfectly understand” the subject matter at hand, is more appropriate for technical or scientific translation. I believe there is no way that the people of today, including myself in the role of translator, can fully understand exactly the sentiments of the time period, the *zeitgeist*, and exactly how the author in question wanted their piece to be understood. We can only intelligently assume what the author intended their audience to understand, just as we can only guess the sentiment of the people she was addressing in regard to the subject matter. I believe that, while the translator must have a general knowledge of the time period and subject matter at hand, it is unnecessary for the translator to “perfectly understand the sense and material of the original author.”

Another point I would tend to disagree with is his requirement for “perfect knowledge”. While it is absolutely imperative to have fluent knowledge of both the original language and the language of the translation, it is not required to preserve the “majesty of the language.” As explained in the next section, some certain phrases, words, and concepts cannot translate “perfectly” into English from Italian. Further, when eventually translated, the words that result in English may not have the same emphasis or “majesty” that they once did in Italian. That does not mean that the translation suddenly becomes a poor one, or that it should be disregarded. It simply means that the English language does not possess the flexibility or vocabulary to describe what the Italian language accomplishes better.

I would like to discuss the idea of humble translations. I tried in my translation to be as humble as possible, so as to avoid any conflicting ideas that could harm the original meaning of Prospero's stories. However, I will affirm that it is a challenge to remain humble when trying to make a coherent and fluid translation. As discussed below, it is necessary to make slight changes, whether it be vocabulary or grammar, to the translation in order to ensure it's readability in the end. While this could effect the emphasis on certain words or ideas, I did not intentionally change anything regarding content. In this sense, I remained humble during the translation,

letting Carola Prosperi's voice be heard through her stories.

The question of how to translate a woman's writing versus that of a man might seem like an odd thing to consider for someone who has never studied translation before. However, it is something that I needed to acknowledge while translating Carola Prosperi. As we can see from Marguerite Duras' quote regarding women and translation mentioned in the Introduction, Duras recognizes the fact that women have been sheltered from experiences that people tend to like to read about, even things as simple as experiences that men have every day. She also, in this sense, is saying that female literature is something unprecedented, and something that cannot be related to anything that has happened in the past. However, what do you do when you're translating a woman writer who is writing from the point of view of a man? Clearly she is writing from “darkness”, as Duras would say, but is what she's saying incredulous, or can it be seen as revolutionary?

This is the problem I encountered while translating *Fatherhood* and *A Lack of Seriousness*. Prosperi was able to convey her feminist ideals through the figure of a man, whether it was directly through him or through a story that the protagonist was telling. By doing this, it might have been a way to make her stories more appealing to the population at the time. As we have learned above, women writers were not viewed as relevant or important to the general public, and were usually disregarded and overlooked. However, if it appeared that a man was talking in the story, it could be possible that more people would read it and consider it to be something written by the hands of a man, instead of a woman. While I am not certain that this is why Prosperi was writing from the perspective of a man, it is an interesting idea to consider. However, when it comes to translating this type of a story, would you ignore the woman behind the man, or would you give her a voice? In this case, I decided to become an invisible translator,

and let the voice that was intended to be there shine through, whether it was a completely masculine voice, as can be seen in *A Lack of Seriousness* when Claudio is talking about how to raise children, or a somewhat feminine voice, as when Paolo is talking about how he feels that he killed his son in *Fatherhood*.

Another interesting idea appeared when I was translating the last story, *The Dark Passion*. When reading about Fascist doctrine, it became apparent that a woman's purpose was to be complacent and please the husband, at any cost. However, when translating the section in which the mother, Mrs. Costanza, was speaking to her daughter Elena in the end, it was, in a sense, a very masculine voice, or at least a very contemporary feminine one. By calling her daughter a “woman” and meaning it to be an insult, it immediately registered as a male voice in my mind. Today, women do not insult each other by calling them women. You would only ever hear that insult from a woman to a man, a man to a woman, or a man to a man, but never a woman to a woman. Because of this, it occurred to me that maybe Carola Prosperi was trying to be ambiguous, and trying to keep her gender out of the central theme of her stories. While her opinions might have been integral in the stories, there are points of view from both genders. This makes the stories universal, not just in terms of the subject matter, but also in the voices behind the stories, as there is rarely a clear male or female role.

VI. Problems with Translation

Although I tried to remain an invisible translator throughout this work, some problems emerged during the translation process that prohibited me from being invisible. While I strived not to change the sense-for-sense aspect of the translation, many of the problems led to the inevitable change of the word-for-word aspect. The first issue I came across was the use of colloquialisms. Prosperi refrained from writing in a formal style, which led to many colloquial phrases and addition of colloquial words. For example, in the first story, *Fatherhood*, we can see that there were certain phrases, such as “al diavolo tutto ciò che...” Translated directly, it means “to the devil everything that...” While this is not technically incorrect to say in English, it comes off as an awkward phrase, and something that is not heard much in day to day conversations, or even in literature. Thus, I translated it to something of similar meaning, using the word “damn” instead of “to the devil.”

The Italian language uses many colloquial phrases that do not translate easily to the English language. One example of this is the phrase *mano a mano*. Literally translated, this phrase means *hand to hand*, which does not make sense in the context in which it is written. However, when translated sense-for-sense, the phrase means *step by step*, or slowly. In the same story, Prosperi makes reference to the main character taking off his *paletot*. At first, the word confused me, since I had never seen this word in any piece of Italian literature in the past. However, I then realized, at the time of this story, French was still viewed as a language of the aristocracy. Because the man in the story appeared to be of a higher class, I translated the word from French, only to discover that it meant *jacket*, and perhaps in doing so I missed some of the notion of using an elite word, as Prosperi intended.

Regarding Tytler's "Three General Laws or Rules", I found myself focusing the most on these ideas while translating a rant by Claudio in *A Lack of Seriousness*. Because Claudio is nervous about the arrival of the baby and still somewhat disappointed with his wife, Augusta, and trying to calm himself by airing his grievances regarding the youth of the day, the flow of the rant is somewhat choppy and broken up. I followed Tytlers' idea of the translation having "all the ease of the original composition" and "the ideas of the original work" by translating it in the following way⁴²:

...un maschio o una femmina... in fondo mi è indifferente. Questo non importa niente, quello che importa è l'educazione, capitano. E l'educazione bisogna incominciarla presto... quasi, si può dire, dai primi giorni di vita del bambino. Il bambino si accorge subito se può dominare o se sarà dominato, sente subito la forza della mano che lo deve guidare. Ah, vi assicuro che noi avremo la mano solida, capitano! Non dico di mia moglie che, poveretta... si è diversa da noi, è stata allevata in un altro ambiente... per quando ora si sia uniformata... sì, insomma, ma è un po' diversa. Del resto, non sarà lei destinata a dirigere questa educazione : sarà io. E vi assicuro che mio figlio non diventerà uno di questi giovanetti, che a sedici anni han già la chiave del portone e possono andare al Caffè concerto o giocare e che mia figlia non diventerà simile a queste ragazze che girano per la strada con le sottane strette e I tacchi alti, invece di stare a casa a far la calza...

...a boy or a girl... really it doesn't make much of a difference to me. This doesn't mean anything, that which matters is education, Captain. And you need to start education early... almost, you could say, from the first days of life of the child. The child understand immediately if it will dominate or be dominated, it feels the strength of the hand that will guide it. Ah, I promise you that it will have a solid hand, Captain! I'm not saying that it will be my wife, poor thing... she's different from us, she grew up in a different environment... but now she has grown accustomed... yes, well, she's a bit different. She won't be the one destined to give out child their education: it will be me. And I promise you that my son won't be one of these young people, that at 16 years old he will already have the house key and go to the concerts at the Caffè or to go play, and that my daughter won't be like those girls that go walking down the streets with tights skirts and high heels, instead of being at home with her knitting...

As can be seen in the original version, Claudio is using this speech as a way to convince himself that having a child was the right thing to do. Also, it appears that he is trying to justify how horrible he and his family have been to his wife. They completely changed who she was as a

42 Tytler, 27

person, and yet they are still not satisfied with the person she has become. Because of these hidden meanings and feelings that come through in this rant, it was very important to keep the flow and character that was present in the original prose.

Another problematic area that was continual throughout the entire piece was the use of punctuation. While the Italian language can afford to have numerous run-on sentences and still make sense, the English language does not offer the same luxury. In many cases, such as descriptions of characters or places, sentences would take up entire paragraphs, and have no clear break. In these cases, I sometimes tried to add more semi-colons, or find a convenient place to start a new sentence. When starting a new sentence, however, I found that I had to add a few words to help the descriptions flow smoothly from one sentence to another. Yet another issue that was prevalent involved the clarification of person. In the Italian language, personal pronouns are used much more frequently. At the same time, however, personal pronouns for he and she can sometimes lead to ambiguity in the piece of literature, especially when it is being translated into a language such as English that uses names more than personal pronouns. To remedy this, I replaced the pronouns *lei* and *lui* with the names of the specific character, in order to help the reader understand exactly who was talking or being talked about.

Though I might disagree with the strictness some of Dolet's points in his Five Principles, the one I agree with the most is the idea of avoiding “word-for-word renderings.”⁴³ While I did strive to be an invisible translator and avoid changing the majority of the text, there are some passages in which it was impossible to leave the translation as it had been word-for-word. Such a passage is as follows:

Ebbe una mala parola, una parola atroce, un impeto di sdegno e di rabbia che

43 Dolet, 27

soffocò in parte la paura che lo paralizzava e gli diede la forza di chinarsi a raccattare, chiudendo gli occhi, la piccola orribile cosa, di chiuderla nel vecchio giornale – e al molle contatto si sentiva trafigger la nuca da mille dolori – poi in altre carte, di legare il pacco col grosso spago e di stringerlo forte. Il senso del pericolo, di quella sciagurata responsabilità che gli bisognava accettare, lo spinse ad agire, rapido e preciso. Buttarlo in casa no, era troppo pericoloso. C'era da ringraziare Dio che non se ne fossero accorti. Riportarglielo a lei? Non sarebbe stato mal pensato, ma chissà che grida che insulti, che scene! Meglio era sbarazzarsene per la strada, nella notte, come fa una qualunque ragazza sedotta che non ha amici che l'aiutino e deve aiutarsi da se sola.

He mumbled a bad word, an atrocious word, a fit of rage and anger that suffocated in part the fear that paralyzed him and gave him the strength to bend down to collect that small, horrible thing, to put it back in the old newspaper – and at the soft contact the back of his neck was pierced with pain – then he covered it with another piece of paper, and tied the package tightly with the thick twine. The feel of danger, of that wretched responsibility that he needed to accept, pushed him to act quickly and precisely. He couldn't throw it away at home, it was too dangerous. He had to thank God that no one had noticed it earlier. Could he bring it back to her? It wasn't a bad idea, but who knows about the should, the insults, the scene she would cause. It would be better to get rid of it on the street, during the night, just like any of the seduced girls would do if they had no friends to help them and they had to help themselves.

As can be seen in the Italian passage, many of the words fall out of order in the English sense.

Also, some phrases, such as “*c'era da ringraziare Dio che non se ne fossero accorti*” would not make sense directly translated directly word-for-word. I changed the sentence structure in order for it to make sense in the English translation. Furthermore, I changed some of the vocabulary that would have not made any sense in English. While the words that I used still hold the same significance and meaning, as to not change the original meaning of Prospero's story, some words just fit better in English than the word-for-word translation, as seen in the sentence “...col grosso spago”, translated to “with the thick twine” instead of the “fat twine.”

The last sort of problem I ran into was an issue of repetition and order. While in most cases it is accepted to use repetition in spoken dialogue, Prospero used repetition frequently in her descriptions. One example occurs when she repeats the word *adagio* to emphasize just how slow the character was moving. While it might sound correct in an Italian text, translating *adagio*

adagio directly to *slowly slowly* does not sound correct in an English translation. To fix this problem, I only translated one of the repeated words, deleting the other. While the emphasis was not as clear as it had been in the original Italian, I chose to avoid awkwardness in the translation instead of keeping the emphasis. There are many examples of Prospero writing in a confusing and convoluted order. For example, when she writes “*adagio, bisognava andare*” it translates to “slowly, he needed to go.” While Prospero is clearly placing the word *adagio* before the action to add emphasis, this does not translate well to English, and loses its emphasis in the translation. To remedy this problem, I changed the word order to make it a more coherent sentence in English, saying “he needed to go slowly.” While one could argue again that the emphasis is lost in the translation, I will argue that the more important thing in a translation is the readability and the fluidity, not the emphasis of certain words.

The last problem I encountered was very specific. In *The Dark Passion*, I have already addressed the word, *femmina*, that Mrs. Costanza uses to insult her daughter, Elena, upon her decision to return to her abusive husband. In the translation, I used the word *woman* to replace *femmina*, but this is problematic. While *femmina* translates directly to female, there is not much of a difference between the words *female* and *woman* in the English language. In fact, the Collins English Dictionary defines the word *female* as “of, relating to, or designating the sex producing gametes (ova) that can be fertilized by male gametes (spermatozoa)”⁴⁴, and the word *woman* as “an adult female human being”⁴⁵ While the Italian dictionaries might have similar definitions, colloquially, the words *donna* and *femmina* have very different meanings. A *donna* refers to the way that you would address a woman, while a *femmina* refers more to the characteristics of a

44 "Female." *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition* HarperCollins Publishers 09 Mar. 2013. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/female>

45 "Woman" *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition* HarperCollins Publishers. 09 Mar. 2013. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/woman>

woman, their feminine qualities. Since in English, female is used usually solely to distinguish the gender of the person, and not their character, the word woman works for both of the definitions that are in question. Calling either a man or a woman a *woman* in English tends to have negative qualities surrounding it, just as calling someone a *femmina* does in Italian, though for different reasons. As stated above, the word *femmina* can refer to the animalistic tendencies, such as dependency. However, in English, it can be argued that calling someone a *woman* can be parallel to calling them a coward. Since using the word *female* to convey this insult would not have worked in the minds of modern English readers, I made the decision to use the word *woman*, since it is a more commonly used insult in English today, and would resonate with more of the population.

Caged Happiness
by Carola Prospero

1. Fatherhood

The large grandfather clock in the entrance struck four when the student Paolo Gavini opened the door. He placed his dress shoes on the small heater, entered and put his dripping umbrella with the others under the coat hanger. The house was silent, as if it was deserted, as dark as night and cold, even though the owner of the house always said that the heater was on until late morning. Gavini's room was the last door on the right of the dark hallway. As soon as he had entered and taken off his wet jacket⁴⁶ and hat, he shivered a little as he got an unpleasant impression that wasn't caused just from the cold. The room, discretely large and well furnished, more elegant than his own personal belongings scattered everywhere, was all in shadow; a yellowish shadow, almost muddy, that here and there made sinister reflections, reflections from a spectral light.

“What a day!” he sighed as he sat down in the room, feeling uncertain for a moment, almost desiring to leave the room again; he walked to the window, raised the shades and glared, annoyed at the street. Even outside everything was yellowish and opaque, people hurried by, with dark faces, as if they were tortured by a secret anxiety.

“What a day!” he repeated, sitting down at the desk and turning on the small, green desk lamp. At his back, the rest of the room remained dark, full of black and menacing shadows. On the large desk his beautiful silver objects shined, illuminated; his inkstand, his letter opener, his small pendulum, his cigarette holder, the frames of familiar portraits: a complete group. The image of the small blonde head of his little sister, a beautiful figure, resembled him. The bulk of

⁴⁶ Originally *paletot*, translated from French

the objects on the desk were school books, French novels with yellowed covers, handouts to cut and opened letters. Paolo opened a book, but instead of reading, he looked at his hands lying flat on the desk: beautiful masculine hands, not too white, not too long, but smooth, warm, and robust, with the well maintained nails of a refined man. Those hands, beyond the cuffs of loose silk, were like an image of his person as a whole: his body was clean, hot, sweet smelling, and well dressed. His face, while not perfectly handsome, was pleasing and healthy, with a fresh mouth, white teeth, clear eyes, short and thick eyelashes, and even thicker hair, dry and perfumed and always accurately coifed. He could not tolerate when people messed up his hair. There was that girl, Irma, who had the habit of grabbing it with her skinny, cold hands, and every time he became infuriated with her. Oh, Irma...the image of her pale face, surrounded by disheveled hair, her eyes red from crying and her mouth swollen, contorted from sobbing, just as he had seen her the last time, flashed in front of him; but he drove the fastidious image away immediately, took another book and tried to study. But the same silence now seemed cumbersome, cold, dark, unsupportable: he yawned loudly, closed the book abruptly and put his head between his hands. How bored he was...how bored he was! "Damn this day." A little earlier, at the cafe, his friend Ugo, a cavalry lieutenant, had said many times: "today is a day to stay in bed until the sun sets." as if the day had a voice and he wanted it to hush. But Ugo had an appointment with a new lover that day and the weather that made people bored excited Ugo. Not him. At that time, he didn't have any lovers, he didn't want any, nor did he remember any. He just remained alone and that was it. That is, yes he remembered, he had to. Irma returned to the front of his memory, not as disheveled and furious as the last time, but rather in love, passionate and upbeat, just as she had always been. Her face seemed in pain, even in the happiest of moments. She had shadows under

her eyes, lips as cold as her hands and her forced smile. She dressed well and wore nice shoes, when she could, this was true, but she was decidedly skinny, a crybaby, clingy.... that image brought him some disturbing thoughts, they passed through his head slowly, slowly like small, cold, black serpents...he grew impatient. To hell with everything.

Still time passed and he remained there, his head on his closed book with his hands on his temples, his eyes open and a kind of stiffening in his neck. He had the sensation to turn around and look into the shadows, but it would have been difficult. There was something unpleasant back there. Plus, he preferred not to turn around. Why turn around? It was as if he felt two eyes behind him that were glaring, there, at his neck. They glared at him with a cold, hard look like a nail: two large eyes, black, underlined by the shadow...maybe he was dozing off. And that glare got closer, it got closer and enveloped everything like something cold, something slippery that made him shudder even down to the marrow in his bones. It was probably just a nightmare, nothing more than a nightmare, like those that tormented him as a child, at the time of the silliest fears...Time passed, slowly and wickedly just like the nightmare, and Paolo remained there, immobile until the maid knocked lightly at the door around seven. He shook himself, breathed a sigh of relief, and stretched his arms.

“Come in!”

She opened the door and entered quickly, bringing some ironed shirts and putting them on the bed.

“Marietta, if you could turn on the lamp there...”

The room was flooded with vivid light and he jumped to his feet, completely awakened, relieved from a large weight. With a little bit of contempt for himself, he lit a cigarette. How

could he not have smoked that entire time? And where had all of those extravagant dreams come from? The maid, in a white apron, opened the door to leave, but turned back, and, as if to respond to the question, says:

“They brought a package for you today, Mr. Gavini. I'm sorry for not having told you that before; I thought that you had seen it.”

“A postal package?”

“No...a normal one. There it is over there, on the chair near the wardrobe...They brought it by hand.”

“A porter?”

“A girl.”

Paolo didn't ask anything else. The maid left and closed the door, slowly. He remained standing, immobile, in the middle of the room, looking at the package for a moment, then he took it, put it on the desk, put out his cigarette, untied the knot made of coarse twine that bound the package, and undid the paper. Inside was more paper, worn and wrinkled, old newspapers, that he took off one after another with caution... What kind of dumb joke was this? And who had done it? But what he saw at the end surprised him so much that the last paper fell to the floor, with the contents: a small mass of black clotted blood, and that even seemed to have a form. The stench of a tomb hit his face, as if it was something live, something frightening. The thud that it made, falling, seemed like a small scream to Paolo Gavini. And he asked himself, stupidly, “did it scream? Did it scream? Did they hear it over there?”

Flattened from the shock, trembling with disgust, he looked at the floor without understanding, not daring to move, biting his hand without feeling the pain, with an unheard

desire to escape from that small, horrendous thing and hide far away, but still feeling stuck there, in that spot, like the similar terror that links an assassin with the body of the assassinated. He needed to get rid of it to be free! That was the best idea, the first idea that came to mind after that tumultuous sensation. Then the pale and furious face of Irma, her eyes full of darkness and her lips contorted from sobbing, flashed in his memory again, between the black waves of messy hair. She had gotten her revenge...she had gotten her revenge, that one! He mumbled a bad word, an atrocious word, a fit of rage and anger that suffocated in part the fear that paralyzed him and gave him the strength to bend down to collect, that small, horrible thing, to put it back in the old newspaper – and at the soft contact the back of his neck was pierced with pain – then he covered it with another piece of paper, and tied the package tightly with the thick twine. The feeling of danger, of that wretched responsibility that he needed to accept, pushed him to act quickly and precisely. He couldn't throw it away at home, it was too dangerous. He had to thank God that no one had noticed it earlier. Could he bring it back to her? It wasn't a bad idea, but who knows about the shouts, the insults, the scene she would cause! It would be better to get rid of it on the street, during the night, just like any of the seduced girls would do if they had no friends to help them and they had to help themselves. Quickly, he tore up the remaining sheets of newspaper on his desk and threw them away in the trashcan. He then got dressed, placed the package in his jacket pocket, grabbed his hat and walked into the illuminated hallway. In the foyer, the maid handed him his umbrella.

“It's still raining, Mr. Gavini.”

It seemed to him that she was looking at his filled pocket with a bit of confusion: he was a young man of elegance and he never carried packages. Her confusion was justified. With his

heart racing, he hurried to leave, almost fearing any type of observation. Outside, underneath the main doorway, he stopped breathing just for a minute and dried his forehead, realizing that he was sweating slightly. At that time his friend Ugo was already at the restaurant waiting for him. He wasn't repelled by the idea of confiding in him. Ugo, who was older than he, was better acquainted with life and women. He was open-minded, skeptical, and even cynical at times, but with good friends he was helpful. Of course he would have helped and accompanied him on that ill-fated expedition, and Paolo comforted himself in that thought, because he needed to cling on to someone, like a lost child. He quickly made his way to the restaurant and pushed open the glass door. But, entering in the bright and sparkling room, he had just enough time to see that his table was empty, and that Ugo was at another table close-by with a woman, and that the waiter was standing behind him, waiting respectfully to take his jacket and hat and put them on the coatrack in the corner. With a mechanical gesture, Paolo smoothed his hair with his hand, sat at his place, unfolded his napkin and listened attentively to the waiter that, very correctly, leaning in slightly towards him, recited the list of food, giving him respectful suggestions. In that violent light, in the middle of everyone, in the usual elegant environment, he had the impression that his face slowly relaxed, to himself, effortlessly playing the usual part of the hour, which was a look of amiable indifference. Ugo had greeted him with a nod, and he responded with a greeting, accentuating the beautiful young woman, that gave him a long stare, underneath her large tulle hat. Women liked Paolo. When he looked at them, his clear eyes through his thick, dirty brown eyelashes brightened up with a caressing and seducing glance, while his fresh mouth, from his well drawn and slightly swollen lips remained serious. For many, that caress with his eyes was irresistible. He appealed to everyone without discrimination, a habit already formed, like a

courtesy to which he felt obliged. An acquaintance who had already eaten, came to sit down facing him, smoking, and winked at the woman.

“Where would your friend have found her?”

Paolo shrugged his shoulders: his eyes wandered around the room and stopped in the corner, where his jacket hung from the coatrack: you could see the swollen pocket... What if someone placed their hand inside? What if someone took his jacket by mistake? What could they do to him? Arrest him?

“What's wrong?” asked his acquaintance, looking him in the face, seeing that he had stopped eating.

“Nothing... A headache. This day has made me very on edge... Give me a lighter.”

He pushed away his plate and lit a cigarette.

“Eh, yeah,” said the other. “A cursed time...”

He started talking about women again, interminably, which gave Paolo a real physical oppression. He felt as if a stone was pressing on him, bearing down on his heart and not letting him breathe freely. Little by little, the smoke from his cigarette veiled the things around him, while the figures of the others took on grotesque appearances behind the veil, as in fever dreams. Even Ugo's young woman, who was also elegant, with a young face very well made up, seemed ridiculous to him, contorted in a grimace that made her ugly. When Ugo came to say goodbye before leaving, he shook his friend's hand and nodded to him, as if to say “if only you knew what a treasure she is!” He seemed to him, with his face lit up and his eyes shining, hateful even. And it was to him that he had wanted to confide his terrible secret that suffocated him? Better not to trust anyone...anyone at all!

“You're not coming?” asked his acquaintance, standing up.

“No,” he responded dryly and he continued rocking on his chair, smoking. Then he asked the waiter to bring a coffee and a bottle of cognac, and against every one of his habits, he drank a few glasses. Meanwhile, little by little, everyone left. He watched them leave with a fixed stare, almost morbid, filled with aversion. All of those people seemed to be directed towards some pleasing goal: those who were going to the theater, those who were going to make love...Love! He saw that word written across his eyes in letters of fire, like a threat of hell. Had any of them ever found themselves in his situation? None of the men probably...maybe some of the women. One of the same women who were getting up from the table in that moment, beautiful and careless, wrapping themselves in their furs and moving towards the exit, followed by their lovers. All beings were now horrible and disgusting...yes, horrible and disgusting. Everyone was going away...they were leaving him alone inside there, those evil people! And progressively he was left there alone. It seemed to him that his jacket, the last one left hanging, was moving and growing bigger, black and serious, provoked the attention of the waiters, it made itself noticed as something bulky and alive. With a great effort he got up, went to retrieve the jacket, and put it on, with the feeling of a condemned man.

“Now comes the fun!” he thought to himself in the door of the restaurant and grinned, taking his umbrella and walking slowly. Outside there were very few people, even in the arcades on Via Pietro Micca were almost deserted and the streets of Piazza Castello as well. Without thinking about anything, walking like an automaton, he walked passed them all and merged on to Via Po. Step by step, he got closer to the river, and it awoke in him the faculty to observe everything unusual: the passers-by that he saw alone inspired him with a curiosity mixed with

fear. A poor man was sitting underneath a portico, all curled up, with a hat over his eyes and his hands in his pockets. An urge came over him to stop and talk to him. The outcasts of society had always been indifferent or disgusting, but now they interested him, as if he felt tied to them by a strange sense of fraternity. Not the women though, those mistaken girls that seemed to slip out of the sidewalks, appearing in the light for just a moment, between two pillars...they made his heart beat with rage. One of these girls, pale, disheveled, with big black eyes and a mole on her cheek, that seemed to him to slightly resemble Irma, particularly repelled him. At that time she was laughing at him, probably, knowing that she put him in such a horrible situation, satisfied with her vendetta. Maybe she was already having a good time with another man, already healed, already calm, in that same room where he had gone the last time, and where he found her every time, obscene, obstinate in stolid affirmation: "It's yours...it's yours!"

"But, excuse me," he had told her, coldly. "You're trying to tell me that I'm the only one? Give me a little bit of pleasure by not thinking that I'm that stupid, and don't come to me and tell me all of these stories. But wait, you will tell these stories to everyone!"

The girl, ill put, without any flirtatiousness that day, untidy and older, looked at him in silence, biting her lip, twisting her hands, then she started pacing back and forth around the poor room, pounding her feet, as if she was taken by some type of physical craving, like a bad storm that couldn't find an outlet. And suddenly she was attached to him again, awakened, and she made a scene.

"It's yours...it's yours..."

She didn't know how to say anything else, like a maniac. But he, cold and master of himself, didn't let himself be swayed. What the Hell! He wasn't stupid. Had he taken her

virginity? Had he even bothered to check if he was the only one at that time or if there were others, whom probably, certainly even, enjoyed her favors? What was their relationship supposed to be like between a girl who gives it up to everyone, or almost everyone, and a young man of a obvious gallantry? She said that she loved him, but women always say those kinds of things.

He had said everything to her, loud and clear; and the girl, sitting on the bed now, with her hands on her face, listening in silence, watching him put the money on the bedside table. She watched him leave and her black stare through her skinny fingers said, hollowly, "I will get my revenge!...I will get my revenge!"

And she got her revenge: this was it...

Paolo left the porticos. Piazza Vittorio seemed to be a desert. The men were sparse, small and black, and the trams ran with a far and dismal screech. He walked, always faster, pushed by the improvised fury of a man that wants to end his suffering. In a few minutes he crossed the bridge and arrived at the border of Casale, and continued walking on the street that hugged the river that led to the Madonna del Pilone. His fear was livid, cold, and slippery, submerged in the shadows of the thickets. It crouched on his shoulders, squeezing his neck, and pushing him forward and never left him. Was it natural, good God, was it natural that at that time a well-dressed man was walking on that street? If someone caught him, whether it was the police, a criminal, a pair of lovers, he would be lost, literally lost... Around him there was a terrible silence, worse than the roar of ruins. He closed his umbrella, walked down through the bushes, on the soft ground, holding on to the trunks of the trees that seemed to wriggle like living things. Then with his trembling hand he fondled, fondled, and found his pocket, took the package, and he threw it out with an sudden snap. There was a small thud...

Now he stayed there, stuck in the soft ground, as if invisible hands held his feet still; at the end he took a deep breath, climbed back up the riverbank, re-entered the street, and began walking, and then running madly. But the fear that now seemed to be clinging to him stopped him again, with its icy fingers like a skeleton. If someone saw him running this way, he would have been in trouble. He needed to go slowly, slowly like a stroll... The border... then the bridge... then Piazza Vittorio. In Piazza Vittorio he passed a taxi, stopped it, and got in. Safe... My God, safe! He passed his hands over his face as if to regain his lost spirits, he felt his arms, his shoulders. He was himself, still himself, Paolo Gavini, a young man of good family, a student in Torino, a free and healthy man, without chains, with a happy future. The sensation of inexpressible relief which he enjoyed in that moment inspired him with a certain leniency for humanity, that same humanity that a little bit earlier scared him and made him hate everyone, the lost women included. These women in their maternity, wretched and abandoned, had to do that which he, a man, had done exceptionally that night. They pitied him.

“Disgraceful...” he said. “You should never think of these things!”

He thought that it was very late: as if the entire night had passed during the anxiety, but he saw in Piazza Solferino that the people were just now exiting from the Alfieri theater. It inspired some happy thoughts: the next day even he would be at the theater, and then after a few more days he would no longer have to wear the torments of this night.

He re-entered the house slowly, walking on the balls of his feet. His illuminated room was now happy, clear of yellowish and sinister reflections, scary shadows, menacing eyes, fever dreams. He undressed quickly, hit his shoes on the pavement to rid them of dirt, and laid down underneath the blankets thinking that tomorrow could be the day he wanted, he didn't care about

anything anymore... And he shut his eyes.

But as soon as he shut his eyes, he saw it in the room... Not scary shadows, not menacing eyes, not reflections of nightmares... No, but that poor package, tied with the thick twine, there on the seat next to the dresser... His heart started beating fast, and with his trembling hand he reached for the light switch, and looked around. What package? There wasn't anything! Was the disease of fear settling in? He remained immobile looking into nothingness, with his elbow pressed on his pillow.

“No,” said something serious inside of him. “It's not fear now...”

He knew well that it wasn't fear. It was that terrible thought, the strongest, the most secretive, that which tormented him the most during those wretched hours, but he never dared to admit it. Stronger than fear, than anger, than rage, it hit his brain like lightening, making him obey it, accept it, admit it, just like it was, hot and flaming. Yes, the child was his. He had heard that it was his, since the woman had affirmed it angrily. He rejected it with arrogance and contempt that she shouldn't be sure about the fatherhood. Something in his heart, an instinct that never failed, which Paolo had inside of him, still pure and sincere, had told him: “It's yours! What the woman is saying is true!”

But he hadn't wanted to give up. The everyday Paolo, a man of the world, a man who saw his future in front of him, a selfish reasoner, rebelled. Every man would have done the same in his case! So what was the problem?

“It was yours...” repeated the ruthless voice inside of him. He was certain. That which he had thrown in the cold and rainy river, was flesh from his flesh, blood from his blood, and now this piece of life lay dead, frozen, in the turbid depth of that water, and nothing in the world

would have ever seen it again. It had made a small thud, and that was it... The entire night he thought of that thud that replayed in his his head like a desperate scream...

Still, years later, every time, the morning, just as he awoke, a voice inside of him, without an echo, but sweet and deep, repeated to Paolo Gavini:

“You killed your son...You killed him!...”

2. A Lack of Seriousness

No havoc, no uproar, none of the usual agitations that upset homes in similar occasions. Complete tranquility. That morning, as soon as she woke up, Augusta, letting herself fall onto the couch, had stammered, looking around lost and wringing her hands, with a convulsive gesture:

“I think...I think I feel worse than usual...”

“Good!” exclaimed her mother-in-law. “Fantastic... That means that we're ready...”

Everything was set within a few minutes, with the precision and experience of serious people who never lose their minds under any circumstances. The midwife was called, the widowed sister-in-law rushed to the scene, the silent sister-in-law was sent for the neighbors, the servants were made aware, and the father-in-law was in the dining room, ready to be called. Claudio, the husband, paler than usual and frowning, fixed the knot of his tie with nervous hands in front of the mirror and thought about whether or not he should go into the office. He was a young man, tall but a little stocky, with black hair and a blonde mustache, almost reddish, dark, round eyes, a large aquiline nose, a square jaw, with an expression of satisfied presumption and solemn severity. He dressed himself with banal elegance.

“I'm not going to go...” he decided in his head as he entered his wife's room, trying to give his wife a glance, contrite and encouraging and the same time. He thought to himself: “Augusta completely lacks courage and seriousness! It's so easy for her to let herself break down!”

He called her to in a tone of voice that was meant to be comforting and imperative at the same time, the same tone that he used, one time, to teach a puppy how to stand on his hind legs.

“Come on, Augusta, come on! Courage!”

She was walking around the room, being supported under her armpits by two women, while the others occupied themselves with the preparation of the bed of pain. She turned to look at him, in silence, her bruised face, her eyes with the supplicant stare of a terrified animal caught in a snare, and her mouth contorted into a grimace of restrained tears. Of course, he never would forget that face, that expression of an abandoned animal, more excruciating than ever in the middle of all those people.

With a certain sense of embarrassment he felt that his encouragements were maybe insufficient, combined with the fact that in that moment he was the most useless person in the entire house.

His mother – with a pale face, black hair, round eyes, an aquiline nose, the same hard expression on her face, the same stature, the same poise – went to meet him with an air of expertise.

“Go, go,” she told him. “You're not necessary. You can come back around 7, but not before.”

Obediently, he left, with an air of gravity, without being able to suffocate a certain anxiety: “If only Augusta had more courage...” he said to himself. “If only she looked a little bit like me!”

But Augusta didn't look a thing like him. Rather, the diversity that was so visible between the two of them caused a profound stupor for the people that knew them. “How could they have gotten married?”

This question was also asked by the mother of Claudio, with a nasal voice and a wrinkled forehead, who usually added “My son was so serious as a child!”

It was very true: as a child, Claudio had taken life seriously. He had seemed like a man until now, and a man of bad humor, always occupying himself with his school work, and lately his work from the office. He always had his nose in his books, always aware to not let his neighbors cheat, sulky and serious. He never laughed, never made a noise and sometimes, with a severe air about him, glared at his father when he attempted to tell a joke that he had heard at the dinner the table.

“Claudio looks like me,” said his mother, proudly. “He looks more like me than the other children. How could a young man such as him marry a girl like Augusta?”

It wasn't that Augusta was good wife. Quite the contrary: young, healthy, spotless, grown up in the city, only child, with a discrete dowry and a good personality, tall and skinny, with wispy brown hair, a round, pale face with dimples, a big, divided chin, large red lips and blue eyes, calm, and laughing. There, laughing, in fact, too laughing! They had spoiled her, she even confessed it herself; her parents listened to her in ecstasy, to her childish chirping. They would always pull her up quickly and give her kisses and hugs, without ever speaking of sad things, nor of misery, of duties... they were happy looking at her while she ate or slept, listening to her play the piano, watching her jump around the house, maybe only on one foot, hearing her laughing with her friends, or chatting with the canaries in front of their cage on the balcony full of flowers. They never asked anything of their daughter, nothing more than being beautiful and funny, or talking with her tender heart, or knowing how to give so many kisses with such sweetness, or to love and laugh...

Oh, an incorrect education, absolutely incorrect, from beginning to end! Claudio's mother, when the girl had come to the house, fresh like a spring breeze, with her eyes still damp from the tears caused by her parents separation, but with her lips already in a smile, she remained a little taken aback and thought to herself:

“That girl must not have been educated in a very serious way...” A little later, after having told her son about her doubts, she calmed herself a bit after hearing him respond:

“Well then, mother, we'll re-educate her. Beneath it all, Augusta is a good person.

Yes, she was a good person, perhaps too soft, too malleable for those tough hands. Even she, as soon as she had entered into her new home, had heard that not all parents were like her own, the same ones that were now crying, poor things, in their empty house. But her cheerfulness was so spontaneous in her soul she wasn't able to conform right away to the cold seriousness of the environment in which you never laughed and never said a word more than what was necessary. For a little, she continued laughing, running from window to window, chatting, offering caresses with her white hands, kisses from her fresh mouth, with such a lack of seriousness, oh! a lack of seriousness that shocked everyone. Everyone, her parents-in-law, her husband, her widowed sister-in-law who was depressed, her quiet sister-in-law who was nervous, made, made a commitment with zeal and ardor to infuse her with the seriousness that she lacked. One by one, her laughs were suffocated, her smiles extinguished, her hand that gave caresses became used to staying in her lap, her fresh mouth had learned to stay shut, and her eyes learned to see things in a different way. It was a great deal of work, but anyways, the re-education was done. Now there was nothing bad: Augusta knew how to move and when to speak, and her eyes filled with fear always looked at her husband's face, as if to read his commands and orders, that

she needed to obey.

“If only,” Claudio persisted to think, always under the weight of that certain uncertainty.

“If only she had a little bit of courage.”

He sighed, shaking his head and realizing that courage, especially in those situations, was more difficult to instil than seriousness.

He arrived mechanically before his office door, and entered. The usher was in the hall dozing; two employees, taking advantage of the miraculous absence of their boss, sure to not be seeing him until tomorrow, had already left. The only one left was the older one, an old man who was a little deaf, ex-military, straight, stiff, with an immobile and wrinkled face, with small elusive eyes, covered in sadness. He was an amazing employee, taciturn, active, precise like a machine. Seeing his boss enter he stood up, but didn't make the slightest movement of shock when Claudio, with a cordiality that was very unusual, pats him on the back and says, “It's happening, Captain...”

“Good, good...” responded the old man with his usual low voice. “A boy, Mr. Engineer?”

“Ah, we don't know yet...” And Claudio started laughing. “We won't know anything until tonight, at least that's what my mother says, and she understands those things...”

“Surely, surely...”

“Until tonight...”

The captain went back to work, with his head low, and Claudio tried to imitate him, but he couldn't. He felt, like never before, the need to talk, to move around, to communicate with someone. Looking every second at his watch, he grew impatient and amazed to see how slowly

the time passed. Still he sat in his place. What the Hell! Did he, he especially, want to give off the impression of such little seriousness? Sitting, instead of writing, he put his elbows on the desk and placed his head in his hands and began talking to the Captain, who never responded, but let his head nod from time to time, respectfully.

“...a boy or a girl... really it doesn't make much of a difference to me. This doesn't mean anything, that which matters is education, Captain. And you need to start education early... almost, you could say, from the first days of life of the child. The child understands immediately if it will dominate or be dominated, it feels the strength of the hand that will guide it. Ah, I promise you that it will have a solid hand, Captain! I'm not saying that it will be my wife, poor thing... she's different from us, she grew up in a different environment... but now she has grown accustomed... yes, well, she's a bit different. She won't be the one destined to give our child their education: it will be me. And I promise you that my son won't be one of these young people, that at 16 years old he will already have the house key and go to the concerts at the Caffè or to go play, and that my daughter won't be like those girls that go walking down the streets with tight skirts and high heels, instead of being at home with her knitting...”

He flung himself against the youth of today, against the weakness of parents, against the universal levity. He grew eloquent and in his voice you could hear the satisfaction, the bitter pleasure of someone who had always had an aversion to all of the joys in life and who could finally exert himself over two beings that belong to him, the delights of restless seriousness, systematic contradictions, an illuminated tyranny. He was already looking forward to that joy, while he repeated with his satisfied smile: “A solid hand, right, Captain?”

“It's true, it's true...”

“Well, these are not new things for you, since you are ex-military. Your family was this way too, right?”

For a while, the old man did not respond. Then he said, with a voice that seemed even more tired and more faint:

“I had this misfortune to lose all of my family and to end up alone... So it's really a different situation, Mr. Engineer, and I see everything in a different way...”

He shut up. A chill passed through the air and Claudio shivered. He frowned, became mute right away, and made himself write, with an effort of will. There was a long silence, a few hours passed and at nightfall the Captain left, after putting all of his papers in place. Claudio stayed there for another moment, alone, and then went home, slowly: he didn't want to get there too early, or too late...just in time.

He got there in time to see the house upside down, the doors wide open, the terrified face of his mother, as she ran to meet him, breathless and shaking:

“Just now...the delirium...suddenly...we called, but you weren't there anymore...The girl was stillborn...”

“Who is singing right now?” he screamed, tightening his teeth.

“It's her...”

In bed, Augusta, with her deranged face, sang loudly, interrupting herself time to time to laugh with a horrible cheerfulness; she shook and shook her head on the pillow and hugged something shapeless and pale to her chest, a little bundle that, at first, Claudio couldn't identify.

“What is that?”

“The baby...”

The husband, clutching his head between his hands, bent over his wife and called out:

“Augusta!”

She didn't respond. She looked at him and laughed, and then looked at the others and laughed again... it seemed that she was challenging them with rapture, with irony... Then she didn't see anyone. She looked far away, in the darkness, in the emptiness, and she saw a triumph of sun, glimmering rays of light, fields of gold, scarlet flowers. She heard the songs of the larks, of her canaries, she saw her flowered balcony, a far away world, superbly happy, to which she slowly ran, with her head towards the sky, her hair blowing in the wind, her baby girl hugged to her chest, singing with joy like a liberated slave.

3. The Dark Passion

When Mrs. Costanza arrived to get her and take her away, Elena was alone in a room on the bottom floor, sitting in an corner, immobile, with her hands in her lap, staring blankly, obliviously. Her mother, from the threshold, hardly recognized her, and called out to her calmly, with a sob:

“Elena! What are you doing?”

Elena saw her come over to her without shock; instead of jumping up to hug her, she murmured sorrowfully:

“They left me here alone...”

Seeing her reduced to this form, skinny, destroyed, with hair striped with grey, her face emaciated, bruised from a strike to the face, dry lips, her lost gaze, a person completely shrunken down. Mrs. Costanza felt a sword drive through her heart.

“They couldn't assassinate me,” she thought. “But they could shock me.”

She started talking sweetly, slowly, almost fearing not being understood well.

“Come on, courage. By now everything is done. One couldn't say that you got this separation easily, but, in the end, you got it. Free, you're free! You can come away with me right away, actually you have to... And your trunks? And your things? You didn't prepare anything? You don't have anything? Well, all the better. Come with me as you are. And where is *he*?”

Her husband was far away, hunting.

“And where is *she*?”

The mother-in-law was on the floor above them, shut in her room. The house - a large

house in the countryside that looked like an old crumbling castle and a farm at the same time – seemed to be empty and, with the windows closed, the large, squalid, and cold rooms, with a profound silence, like a tomb, had a certain gloominess that squeezed the heart. Suddenly, they heard someone slinking in the next room, whispering softly, a whisper that came closer and then went away: they were the servants that were spying on them. A groom appeared in the doorway, then crossed the rustic and deserted hallway in silence and opened the door of the stable. You could hear the sound of dry footsteps of the horses and the piercing neighing.

Mrs. Costanza shivered: it was as if she had entered in that sinister house like one falls into a trap. She looked over her shoulder, shaking, with the terror of those who are afraid of being surrounded by enemies at any moment.

And to say that Elena had lived inside there for ten long years, ten grim years of humiliation, of shame, of pain and of tears! Mrs. Costanza couldn't wait to leave, and she wouldn't breathe a sigh of relief until she had taken away her daughter, all bundled up at least in a shawl, with an old fashioned hat on her head, next to her on the train, taking her far away, to home. How long had she not experienced a moment of joy – even sad joy! - such as this! She couldn't say that she was fortunate when it came to her daughters. The first, Angelica, who looked like her, died young, full of life, married a for a few years and a mother for a few months, leaving as her legacy a daughter that fell ill. The second, Adele, ran away from home with an infamous adventurer, she never came back to her childhood home. She became a mediocre actress, a famous socialite, and she passed her miserable life of risk and adventure who knows where. But none of them had surpassed in misery the grim fate of the last one, Elena. As a little girl, during a holiday with family friends, she fell in love with that young man, who asked her

right away to marry him. Mrs. Costanza wasn't happy, deep down, but seeing as he was from a good family, discretely rich, young, as handsome as he was vulgar, tall, strong, tan, with an energetic and hard face, very taciturn, almost timid, of reserved manner, of simple taste, living in the country with his mother... You could not say no lightly. And Elena was in love, which was an even bigger reason. So, right after they got married, the husband took her away to that big house in the country, where the poor thing, was told by the neighbors, the servants, and the acquaintances, that she was never allowed to have any kind of visitors. The mother-in-law was an old hag, jealous of her daughter-in-law, ready for all of the hatred, for all of the infamies even to overwhelm her. The husband wasn't anything but a crude peasant, a very brutal man, full of cruel instincts and complicated wickedness. Between these two, Elena, dominated, vilified and even beaten, had lived the most miserable life of a slave that one could ever imagine, losing all consciousness and every piece of dignity, becoming a crude peasant herself, more neglected than the maids that served the house, almost forgetting that she used to be an elegant young woman of high society. It seemed that he took pleasure in degrading her in every way: one time he beat her in the presence of others, and another time he kicked her out of the house, letting her shake from the cold the entire night.

Mrs. Costanza had heard these things from strangers. As refined, generous, impulsive, and sensible as she was, she yearned and moaned with pain, worse than if she had her daughter lying in a coffin. Still, because of the fear that her son-in-law inspired, she had thrown herself into the fight, passionately and stubbornly. She found herself in a horrible fight against two evil people, in a fight without a truce that costed her peace, health, money, and that made her pass desolate days and horrible nights of crying and despair as if Elena could not tear herself away

from a cave of robbers.

Sometimes, the lawyers would get involved and they grew impatient, raising their arms telling her:

“My dear, your daughter just needs to move around a little bit! She doesn't need to do much, in the end! She's a woman, not a sheep... You could almost say that she doesn't appreciate all that we're doing for her...”

“She's a poor, unconscious girl!” moaned Mrs. Costanza. “She's been brutalized by those two... And she's probably scared.. I'm scared, think of that! I have never been there and I don't intend to go... I'm sure that they themselves would shoot me with a pistol in the back or one of the peasants would shoot me! And they definitely intercept my letters. No, no, it needs to end, I had to spend my last penny and bring myself to misery. I thank God that my poor husband died ten years ago, right when Elena got married. If only he had seen how badly the marriage turned out!”

Every now and again, in response to the numerous letters written by her mother, Elena wrote briefly, vaguely, scribbling like a child, with unstitched sentences, in which she complained but it wasn't clear about what, contradicting herself right after with sentences less incoherent.

“You see?” said Mrs. Costanza, who went to read the letters to the lawyers. “Even she doesn't know what she's afraid of. It's evident!”

In the end the fight was ended abruptly: by now, the mother-in-law was old and didn't have enough energy to rebut, and maybe the husband was tired of fighting to keep a wife to abuse and nothing else.

“It's like a dream,” said Mrs. Costanza when she saw Elena in the house, and everyone cried that day: the servants who had known her when she was younger, the old Mrs. Stella who had been the teacher to all three of the girls and now the grandchild, Maria Luisa; even her, a soft, translucent, sickly figure that had been seen like an aunt when she was little. But she didn't remember that now, crying desperately upon seeing her, from joy and compassion together.

“We'll need to remake her life now.”

That's what her mother said and thought, and everyone occupied themselves with the remaking of her life. They treated her with infinite concern, as if she had just gotten out of ten years in prison, fasting, and torture of every type. They gave her the most beautiful and happy room, they gave her the most tender meat at the dinner table, they poured her the most generous glasses of wine. Every day, her mother put something for her on her vanity: an exquisite perfume, a bouquet of rare flowers, a bag of sweets... Everyone toiled to offer her refreshments and sweets. But it wasn't easy to remake her life. Elena did not speak, she did not gain weight, and overall she did not change her attitude. Always wearing the same dress, always flat and withered, with a bruised face in which her eyes had a gloomy look about them, and unkept hands. Her hair was tied up in a messy bun on the base of her neck, locks of hair fell out of her bun, hanging on her neck and ears, without her feeling the need to remove them. She seemed like a peasant. Oh the horrible degradation of a creature that was so young, flourishing, beautiful, who respected herself, who was aware of her condition, who loved the elegance of life! And that woman who looked neglected, without honor, without dignity, fallen into degradation, dazed like a sleepwalker, taciturn as if she had become mute, listless and indifferent to everything, always huddled up looking at nothing and biting her nails. She was the Elena of the past, to whom the

daily bath was more indispensable than bread!

With a constant push, her mother tried to wake up her old consciousness. Everyday, timidly, she tried to make an observation.

“Elena, why don't you put any perfume in the water when you wash?”

“Maria Luisa, give Elena your nail powder, you'll see how it will make her beautiful once again!”

“You should change your hairstyle, Elena. With a little bit of art you could easily hide those grey hairs.”

And every time, Elena shrugged her shoulders and said:

“Ah, it doesn't matter... I don't care about these things, you know Mom? I don't care...”

Elena didn't want anything and she was so feral that she ran away every time a visitor was announced. In vain, Maria Luisa offered to play music with her, and Mrs. Stella sacrificed herself to read page after page of the most recent books to her: nothing awakened her degraded soul.

“I don't want to...” she said, thinking of who knows what, biting her nails.

“Oh how they reduced her!” said Mrs. Costanza, dismayed. “She reminds me of someone when she's like this... Who does she remind me of, Stella?”

Mrs. Stella remembered who she looked like. Didn't she have the same abandoned attitude, dark and almost insane, of that wet nurse, the first wet nurse of Maria Luisa, that had become so ill from nostalgia and melancholy thinking about her country and her husband that her breast had dried up?

“It's true! It's true!”

The same terrible brutalization, the same appearance of a married woman...

“Nostalgia of what?”

Mrs. Costanza didn't dare to investigate, but was shocked when Elena told her, one day, with a new voice:

“Did you know, she's dead, that woman...”

“Your mother-in-law? How do you know?”

“*He* wrote me...”

“He writes to you?”

“Only once... Now he's alone...”

“And what do you care now?”

Elena didn't respond and her mother ran to Mrs. Stella.

“Did you know?! Did you know that he writes to her? That he has this kind of audacity? How did the letter get to her? We need to watch her...”

Mrs. Stella watched her and found out that the deaf and dumb girl had managed to corrupt a servant that brought her letters from her husband. Shocked, her mother sighed as if she was in agony.

“So it's not over! That man hates me, and he wants to get revenge...but he will not break me. Plus, Elena won't be tricked...Oh my God!”

Elena shut herself in her room to respond to her husband. Silent, cautious, wary, looking around at every moment with a darkly suspicious air about her, ready to defend herself, she wrote, wrote and wrote...with the same cautiousness she got ready to leave, but at her door, that night, while she was trying to escape, she found the old teacher.

“Elena, you, you are going to kill your mother. Come, come see her. Don't be crazy...”

Listen, you know she loves you... We found out that you want to run away like a lost woman... Your mother will die... At least come listen to what she wants to say to you..."

Reluctantly, almost repugnantly, Elena let herself be led to the room to the next room where her mother, lying on the sofa and pitifully assisted by the sweet, shocked, granddaughter. She had her hands on her heart in turmoil and longing, shaking her head back and forth, so pale that it seemed that she would expire at any moment. To see her daughter dressed, ready to leave, she found enough strength to get up.

"It's not possible," she stammered. "It's not possible... Elena, that man is tricking you... He wants you back just to torture you again and to make me die from a heart attack. Don't believe him Elena!"

"You know," responded her daughter awkwardly, looking at the ground. "Now he's changed... He doesn't have a mother anymore... It will be different, you'll see. You're exaggerating... You've always exaggerated... Plus, he's my husband..."

"And what does that mean?"

"He's my husband and he's my duty..."

"Elena! Nobody has ever had the duty to let themselves be killed! Think about all that you suffered through! And you didn't have to do it, and to see you go back there, like this, voluntarily..."

Her tears suffocated her voice, they dripped from her eyes, they ran down her face, quickly.

Elena sighed, swallowed her spit, with tiredness, she looked around and said again, blindly stubborn, occupied by only one thought, taken by a single desire:

“In the end, he's my husband. He wants me to come back. He's waiting for me...”

“No! This is how a crazy person reacts, or a... If you're crazy, I will keep you here on purpose... You're separated legally, do you understand? And I have the right to detain you. The duty, actually. Are you crazy, then, Elena?”

“I'm not crazy,” responded her daughter abruptly. “And I'm allowed to do what I want. I want to go back to my husband. If I was going to flee this way, it was to avoid a scene, but now that I must declare it, I'll declare it: I want to go back.”

There was a long, labored silence. Then the old woman spoke with a trembling voice.

“Did you hear her? Did you hear her, Maria Luisa, my angel? Stella, my friend, did you hear her? She wants to go back. She wants to leave us, we who have spent half of our fortune and who gave our lives for her... We who pleaded almost on our knees to let us cure and nourish her, to love her and make her laugh... This house where everyone loves her, they serve her and they respect her... She wants to abandon that. This honored house where she lives in peace, she wants to abandon that. She would prefer to return there, to that prison, to that infamous house where she will be scorned, trampled, despised, and beat, yes, beat! Is that really what you want?”

“It's my husband's house... It's my house...”

“No, you know no one prefers darkness to light, stench to perfume, manure to roses, unless... yes unless you're being depraved. Don't tell me you love that man, because if that's real...”

“It is true!” the daughter said proudly. “I have to love my husband...”

“Oh, good reason! A great excuse! See, in this moment it seems to me that you're going back to your husband and dishonoring your house a thousand times more than when your sister

Adele ran away, like you, ashamed, like you, with a lover that was an adventurer, living for games and intrigue, but who seems like a gentleman compared to your drunk peasant of a husband, greedy and cruel. Are you worthy of him, just because you love him? Do you know what you are, if you love him?

They looked at each other for a minute, mother and daughter: the older woman tall and impotent, burning with outrage, the other small and humble, who was curled up as if she wanted to disappear underground, and she even felt that her mother wouldn't have won, that the daughter wouldn't have backed down.

“Do you know what you are? A woman!”

“Grandmother!” stammered Maria Luisa terrified, not understanding the insult. Mrs. Stella started crying, seeing the other's face darken, looking at her mother from below, the same scary stare and vile movement that her husband made when he raised his hand to strike her.

“A woman! Go away!”

She ran away, fuming, and her mother fell down on the sofa. In the dark silence that followed, Mrs. Stella continued to cry silently, Maria Luisa shook like a leaf and Mrs. Costanza sat there staring with dry and hardened eyes at the door from which her unworthy daughter left for good.

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CAROLA PROSPERI

IA

FELICITÀ IN GABBIA

NOVELLE



EDIZIONI
A. MONDADORI
MILANO-ROMA

PATERNITÀ

Sonavano le quattro al grosso pendolo dell'entrata, quando lo studente Paolo Gavini aprì la porta, sfregò accuratamente le sue belle scarpe sulla piccola stuoia, entrò e posò l'ombrello sgocciolante tra gli altri, sotto l'attaccapanni. La casa era silenziosa come se fosse deserta, buia come di sera e fredda, quantunque la padrona affumasse sempre che la stufa stava accesa fin dalla mattina. La camera di Gavini era l'ultima a destra in fondo al corridoio buio. Non appena egli fu entrato e si ebbe levato il paletto umido e il cappello, rabbrivì un poco e provò un'impressione spiacevole che non era soltanto cagionata dal freddo. La stanza, discretamente grande e ben ammobigliata, resa più elegante dai suoi oggetti personali sparsi dappertutto, era tutta in ombra, ma in un'ombra giallastra, quasi fangosa, che metteva qua e là dei riflessi che gli parvero sinistri, riflessi di una luce spettrale.

— Che giornata!... egli ripeté e sedette alla stanza, stette un momento incerto, quasi sentisse il desiderio di uscire di nuovo; poi si avvicinò alla finestra, sollevò la cortina e gettò uno sguardo

infastidito sulla strada. Anche fuori tutto era giallastro e opaco, i passanti frettolosi, tutte le fisionomie scure e come tormentate da un'angoscia segreta.

— Che giornata!... egli ripeté e sedette alla scrivania accendendo la piccola lampada velata di verde. Alle sue spalle la stanza restò buia, piena di ombre nere e minacciose, sullo scrittoio vasto brillarono illuminati i suoi begli oggetti d'argento: il calamaio, il tagliacarte, il piccolo pendolo da scrivania, il porta sigarette, le cornici dei ritratti famigliari: un gruppo completo, e la testina bionda della sorella minore, una bellissima figura, che gli rassomigliava. Poi, alla rinfusa, libri di scuola, romanzi francesi dalla copertina gialla, dispense ancora da tagliare e lettere aperte. Paolo aprese un libro, ma invece di leggere si guardò le mani ben distese sullo scrittoio, belle mani virili, non troppo bianche, non troppo lunghe, ma lisce, calde e robuste, con le unghie ben tenute, di uomo raffinato. Quelle mani, fuor dei polsini di seta floscia, erano come un'immagine di tutta la sua persona: il suo corpo era pulito, caldo, profumato, ben vestito; il volto, se non perfettamente bello, piacente e sano, con la bocca fresca, i denti bianchi, gli occhi limpidi, con le ciglia corte e folte, i capelli pure folli, asciutti e odorosi e sempre accuratamente pettinati. Egli non poteva soffrire che gli scompigliassero i capelli. C'era quella ragazza, Irma, che aveva l'abitudine di cacciarsi dentro le sue mani magre

e fredde, ed egli ogni volta s'adirava con lei. Già, Irma... Il volto livido, circondato dai capelli distinti, con gli occhi rossi di pianto e la bocca gonfia, contorta in un singhiozzo, come l'aveva veduta l'ultima volta, gli balenò davanti; però egli scacciò subito quell'immagine fastidiosa, prese un altro libro e tentò di studiare. Ma lo stesso silenzio gli pare ad un tratto come qualcosa di ingombrante, di freddo, di cupo, di insopportabile: egli sbadigliò rumorosamente, chiuse il libro di colpo e si prese la testa fra le mani. Come si annoiava... Come si annoiava!... Al diavolo una simile giornata!... Poco prima, al caffè, il suo amico Ugo, tenente di cavalleria, aveva detto tante volte: — Oggi è giornata da stare in letto fino a stasera... che egli avevan fatto col dargli sulla voce e farlo chetare. Ma Ugo aveva appuntamento con una nuova amante quel giorno e il tempaccio orribile invece di dargli noia gli faceva piacere. Lui no. Lui in quel tempo non aveva amanti, non ne desiderava e non ne ricordava alcuna. Si seccava e nient'altro. Cioè... ricordarne sì, per forza. E Irma torrava a far capolino nella sua memoria, ma non scapigliata e furente come in ultimo, bensì innamorata, appassionata e noiosa com'era sempre stata quella ragazza, con quel viso doloroso, anche nei momenti allegri, con le ombre sotto gli occhi, le labbra fredde come le mani e il sorriso forzato. Si vestiva e si calzava bene, quando poteva, questo sì, ma decisamente era ben magra, piagnucolosa,

attaccaticcia.... Alcuni pensieri mollesi, che quell'immagine traeva seco, gli passarono pel capo adagio adagio, lenti e striscianti come piccoli e freddi serpenti neri.... S'impazienti. Al diavolo tutto ciò l'...

Forse il tempo passava ed egli rimaneva là a capo chino sul libro chiuso, con le mani strette alle tempie, gli occhi aperti e una specie d'irrigidimento nella nuca. Decisamente aveva la sensazione che voltarsi indietro e guardare nell'ombra della stanza gli sarebbe stato difficile. C'era qualcosa di spiacevole là dietro. E poi preferiva non voltarsi. Perché voltarsi? Era come se sentisse due occhi che dietro di lui lo fissavano. Sì, nella nuca, lo fissavano con uno sguardo freddo e duro come un chiodo, due occhi larghi, neri, sottolineati d'ombra.... Forse egli sonnecchiava. E quello sguardo che s'avvicinava, s'avvicinava e l'avviluppava tutto come qualcosa di gelido, di viscido che lo faceva fremere fin nelle midolla delle ossa, era probabilmente un incubo, nient'altro che un incubo, di quelli che lo tormentavano da bambino, al tempo delle più sciocche paure.... Il tempo passò, lento e malvagio come quell'incubo, e Paolo rimase là, immobile fino a che verso le sette la donna di servizio picchiò leggermente all'uscio. Allora si scosse, ebbe un sospiro di sollievo, stirò le braccia.

— Avanti!

Ella aprì ed entrò in fretta, portando alcune camicie stirate che depose sul letto.

— Marietta, accendila per piacere anche la lampada lì....

La stanza fu inondata di luce vivida ed egli balzò in piedi, completamente desto, sollevato da un peso enorme, con un po' di disprezzo per se stesso, e accese una sigaretta. Come mai non aveva fumato in tutto quel tempo? E dove li andava a pescare quei sogni stravaganti? La dometta, in grembiule bianco, che se n'era andata, riaprì di nuovo l'uscio, quasi per rispondere a quella domanda e disse:

— Hanno portato un pacco per lei, oggi, signor Cavini. Scusi se non glie l'ho detto prima; credevo l'avesse visto.

— Un pacco postale?

— No.... Un pacco qualunque.... Eccolo lì dietro, sulla sedia vicino all'armadio.... L'hanno portato a mano.

— Un facchino?

— Una ragazza.

Paolo non domandò altro, la donna se ne andò e richiuse l'uscio, pianamente. Egli rimase in piedi, immobile, in mezzo alla stanza, a guardare il pacco per un momento, poi lo prese, lo posò sulla scrivania, buttò la sigaretta, sciolse il nodo dello spago grossolano che lo legava e svolse la carta. Dentro era altra carta, logora e spiegazzata, vecchi giornali, che egli svolse uno dopo l'altro con precauzione.... Che scherzo idiota era mai quello? E di chi poi? Ma alla fine ebbe tale un sussulto, che,

l'ultimo foglio cadde in terra, col contento: un piccolo ammasso di sangue ragguinato, nero e che pure pareva avere un forma. Il fetore di sepolcro che se ne sprigionò si avventò al volto chmo di lui, come qualcosa di vivo, di pauroso. Il rumore sordo che fece, cadendo, parve a Paolo Gavini un piccolo grido. Egli si domandò stupidamente: — Ma ha gridato?... Ha gridato?... E se di là hanno sentito?...

Sbarazzato dallo stupore, ricuante di ribrezzo, egli guardava a terra senza capire, senza osare muoversi, mordendosi una mano senza sentire il morso, con un desiderio incantito di fuggire da quella piccola orrenda cosa e di salvarsi lontano e pure sentendosi inchiodato lì, al pavimento, da un terrore simile a quello che lega l'assassino al cadavere dell'assassinato. Bisogna sbarazzarsene per essere libero! Questa fu l'idea più chiara, la prima che scattò su nel suo cervello dopo quel tumulto di sensazioni. Poi il volto pallido e furante di Irma dagli occhi pieni d'ombre e dalle labbra contorte dai singhiozzi, balenò davanti alla sua memoria ancora una volta, tra le onde dei neri capelli distati. Si era vendicata... si era vendicata quella...! Ebbe una mala parola, una parola atroce, un impeto di sdegno e di rabbia che soffocò in parte la paura che lo paralizzava e gli diede la forza di chinarsi a raccattare, chinando gli occhi, la piccola orribile cosa, di chiuderla nel vecchio giornale — e al molle contatto si sentiva trafigger la nuca da mille dolori

— poi in altre carte, di legare il pacco col grosso spago e di stringerlo forte. Il senso del pericolo, di quella sciagurata responsabilità che gli bisognava accettare, lo spinse ad agire, rapido e preciso. Buttarlo in casa no, era troppo pericoloso. C'era da ringraziare Dio che non se ne fossero accorti. Riporglielo a lei? Non sarebbe stato mal pensato, ma chissà che grida, che insulti, che scene! Meglio era sbarazzarsene per la strada, nella notte, come fa una qualunque ragazza sedotta che non ha amici che l'aiutino e deve aiutarsi da se sola. In fretta, stracciò i giornali rimasti sulla scrivania e li buttò nel cestino, poi si vestì, cacciò il pacco nella tasca del paletot, prese il cappello e uscì nel corridoio illuminato. Nell'entrata la donna gli pose l'ombrello.

— Piove ancora, signor Gavini.

A lui parve che ella gli guardasse la tasca gonfia con un po' di stupore: egli era un giovane elegante e non portava mai pacchi: lo stupore della donna era giustificato. Col cuore che gli batteva precipitosamente si affrettò ad uscire, quasi temendo qualche osservazione. Fuori, sotto il portone, respirò, sospò un momento e si asciugò la fronte, accorgendosi che era leggermente sudata. A quell'ora l'amico Ugo era già al ristorante e l'aspettava: non gli ripugnò il pensiero di confidarsi a lui. Ugo, maggiore a lui d'età, conosceva meglio la vita e le donne, era spreghudicato, scettico, perfino cinico qualche volta, ma con gli amici buon figliuolo e ser-

vizievole. Certo l'avrebbe aiutato e accompagnato in quella sciagurata spedizione, e Paolo si riconfortava in quel pensiero, perchè aveva bisogno di aggrapparsi a qualcuno, come un fanciullo smarrito. Affrettò il passo fino al ristorante, spinse la porta a cristalli, ma, entrato nella sala illuminata e scintillante, ebbe appena il tempo di constatare che il suo tavolino era vuoto e che Ugo stava ad un altro vicino insieme con una donna, che il cameriere gli fu alle spalle per impadronirsi rispettosamente del suo paletot e del suo cappello e appenderli all'attaccapanni nell'angolo. Con un gesto macchinale Paolo si raviò i capelli con la mano, sedette al suo posto, spiegò il toragliolo e ascoltò nel suo solito atteggiamento, il cameriere che, molto corretto, leggermente piegato verso di lui, gli recitava la lista dei cibi, dandogli dei rispettosi consigli. In quella luce elegante, in mezzo alla gente, nel solito ambiente elegante, egli ebbe l'impressione che il suo volto si ricomponesse adagio adagio, da se stesso, senza sforzo atteggiandosi all'usuale espressione di quell'ora, cioè ad un'amabile indifferenza. Ugo l'aveva salutato con un cenno, egli rispose al saluto accennandolo verso la bella donna, che gli rivolse uno sguardo lungo, di sotto al grande cappello di tulle. Paolo piaceva alle donne. Quando le guardava, i suoi occhi chiari tra le ciglia folte d'un colore biondo scuro s'illuminavano d'un sorriso carezzevole e seducente, mentre la bocca fresca, dalle labbra ben disegnate e leggermente gonfie, rima-

neva seria. Per molte, quella carezza con gli occhi era irresistibile ed egli la rivolgeva a tutte indistintamente, per un'abitudine ormai presa, come una cortesia a cui si sentiva obbligato. Un conoscente che aveva già pranzato, venne a sedere di faccia a lui, fumando, e strizzò un occhio accennandogli la donna.

— Dove l'avrà pescata l'amico?

Paolo si strinse nelle spalle: il suo sguardo errò intorno per la sala e si fermò nell'angolo, dove il suo paletot pendeva dall'attaccapanni: il gonfio della tasca si vedeva... Se qualcuno cacciava la mano là dentro?... Se qualcuno gli portava via il paletot per sbaglio? Cosa potevano fargli? Arrestarlo?

— Che cos'hai?... gli domandò il conoscente guardandolo in faccia, vedendo che smetteva di mangiare.

— Ho niente... Mal di testa. Questa giornata mi ha messo certi nervi addosso... Dammi un fannifero.

Rispinse il piatto, accese una sigaretta.

— Eh sì, — disse l'altro — un tempo maledetto...

E riprese a parlare di donne, interminabilmente. Ciò causava a Paolo una vera oppressione fisica. Sentiva che qualcosa come un sasso premeva, premeva nel suo cuore e gli impediva di respirare liberamente e che a poco a poco il fumo della sua sigaretta gli velava le cose intorno mentre le figure

degli altri prendevano dietro quel velo degli atteggiamenti grotteschi come nei sogni della febbre. Anche la domina di Ugo che pure era elegante, con un visino giovane assai ben dipinto, gli parve ridicola, contorta in un smorfia che l'imbruttiva, lui poi, quando venne a salutarlo prima di andarsene, stringendogli la mano significativamente e facendogli un cenno che voleva dire: — se sapessi che tesoro! — gli sembrò, col viso acceso e gli occhi lustri, odioso, addirittura. Ed era a lui ch'egli avrebbe voluto confidare il terribile segreto che lo soffocava? Meglio non fidarsi di nessuno... Di nessuno!

— Tu non vieni? gli domandò il conoscente alzandosi.

— No — egli rispose seccamente e seguì a dondolarsi sulla sedia, fumando. Poi si fece portare il caffè e una bottiglia di cognac e contro ogni sua abitudine ne bevve alcuni bicchierini. Intanto a poco a poco se n'andavano tutti. Egli li guardava uscire con occhio fisso, quasi cupo, pieno di avversione. Tutta quella gente sembrava diretta verso qualche mèta piacevole: chi andava a teatro, chi a far l'amore... L'amore! Vedeva quella parola scritta davanti agli occhi in lettere di fuoco, come una minaccia d'inferno. Chi mai di tutti coloro si era trovato nella sua situazione? Di uomini nessuno, probabilmente... le donne si forse... qualcuna di quelle stesse che si alzavano in quel momento da tavola, belle e noncuranti, si avvolgevano nella

pelliccia e muovevano verso l'uscita, seguite dall'amante. Tutti quegli esseri gli facevano ora orrore e ribrezzo... Sì, orrore e ribrezzo. Andassero via tutti... lo lasciassero solo là dentro... gente maledetta! E a poco a poco solo rimase. Allora gli parve che il suo paletot, rimasto l'ultimo appeso, si movesse, si gonfiasse, nero e grave, provocasse l'attenzione dei camerieri, si facesse notare come qualcosa di ingombrante e di vivo. Con uno sforzo si alzò, andò a lui, se lo mise addosso, con una rassegnazione di condannato.

— Ora viene il bello! pensò sulla porta del ristorante e sogghignò, aprendo il parapigiola e incamminandosi a passo lento. Fuori c'era poca gente, anche i portici di via Pietro Micca erano pressoché deserti e quelli di piazza Castello pure. Senza pensare a nulla, camminando come un automa, egli li percorse tutti, poi infilò via Po. A mano a mano però che si avvicinava al fiume, si destava in lui una facoltà d'osservazione del tutto insolita: i passanti che vedeva soli gli ispiravano una curiosità mista di timore; un povero che stava sotto un portone, tutto raggomoliato, col cappello sugli occhi e le mani in tasca, gli fece venir voglia di fermarsi e interrogarlo. Quei rifiuti della società che gli erano sempre stati indifferenti o disgustosi, lo interessavano adesso, come se si sentisse legato a loro da un senso misterioso di fraternità. Le donne no, quelle ragazze equivoche che parevano scivolare fuori sul marciapiede, comparando in luce appena

un momento, tra un pilastro e l'altro, gli facevano battere il cuore di rabbia: una di esse, pallida, arruffata, con grandi occhi neri e un neo sulla guancia, che gli parve vagamente rassomigliasse a Irma, gli ripugnò particolarmente. A quell'ora ella rideva di lui, probabilmente, sapendo di averlo messo in quel guaio terribile, soddisfatta della sua vendetta. E magari se la spassava già con un altro, già risanata, già tranquilla, in quella stessa stanza dove egli era andato l'ultima volta, e l'aveva trovata stravolta, discinta, osinata nella stolta affermazione: — È tuo... è tuo!...

— Ma scusami — egli le aveva detto, freddamente — vuoi forse sostenere che io ero il solo? Fannmi un po' il piacere di non credermi tanto stupido e non venire a raccontare queste storie a me. Ma già, le racconterai a tutti!

La ragazza, mal messa, senza nessuna civetteria quel giorno, spetinata e invecchiata, l'aveva guardato per un poco in silenzio mordendosi un labbro, torcendosi le mani, poi si era messa ad andare su e giù per la povera stanza, pestando i piedi, come presa da una smania fisica, da un male tormentoso che non trovava sfogo. E a un tratto si era di nuovo attaccata a lui, disperata, e gli aveva fatta una scena.

— È tuo... è tuo...

Non sapeva dir altro, come una maniaca. Ma lui, freddo e padrone di sé, non si era lasciato smuovere, che diamine! Non era uno sciocco. L'aveva*

forse avuta vergine quella ragazza? Si era mai preso la briga di controllare se fosse il solo in quel tempo o se altri, com'era probabile, certo anzi, godevano i suoi favori? Le aveva mai fatto una scena di gelosia? Che rapporti c'erano tra loro se non quelli soliti tra una ragazza che si dà a tutti o quasi, e un giovane di una certa galanteria? Essa diceva d'amarlo, ma questo le donne lo dicono sempre.

Tutto ciò egli glie lo disse chiaro e tondo e la ragazza, seduta sul suo letto adesso, con le mani sulla faccia ascoltò in silenzio, poi lo guardò mettere il denaro sul cassetton, lo guardò andar via e il suo sguardo nero fra quelle dita magre diceva, cupo: — Mi vendicherò... mi vendicherò!...

E si era vendicata: ecco tutto...

Paolo uscì fuor dei portici: piazza Vittorio pareva un deserto. Gli uomini erano scarsi, piccoli e neri e i tram correvano con uno stridore lugubre e lontano. Egli camminò sempre più in fretta, sospinto dalla furia improvvisa dell'uomo che vuole abbreviare un'agonia. In pochi minuti attraversò il ponte e arrivò alla barriera di Casale, poi s'inoltrò nella strada che costeggia il fiume e che porta alla Madonna del Pilone. La paura nera, fredda e viscida, sbucò dall'ombra della bosaglia fitta, gli saltò sulla schiena, si accoccolò sulle sue spalle, gli strinse il collo, lo spinse avanti e non lo lasciò più. Era naturale, buon Dio, era naturale che con quel tempo un uomo ben vestito camminasse su

quella strada? Se qualcuno lo coglieva, sia una guardia, sia un malvivente, sia una coppia d'amanti, egli era perduto, letteralmente perduto... Intorno era un silenzio terribile, più terribile di un fragore di rovina. Egli chiuse l'ombrello, scese tra gli arbusti, nella terra molle, aggrappandosi ai tronchi che parevano guizzare come cose vive, poi la sua mano tremante palpò, palpò, trovò la tasca, prese il pacco, e lo buttò con uno scatto improvviso. Il tonfo fu piccolo...

Ora egli restava là, inchiodato nella terra molle, come se delle mani invisibili gli tenessero i piedi fermi; alla fine sospirò profondamente, risalì la riva, rientrò nella strada, prese a camminare, poi a correre follemente. Ma la paura che adesso pareva gli si fosse aggrappata davanti, lo frenò di nuovo, con le sue ghiaccio dita di scheletro. Se qualcuno lo vedeva correre così, egli era perduto egualmente. Adagio, bisognava andare, adagio, come a passeggio... La barriera... poi il ponte... poi piazza Vittorio... In piazza Vittorio passava una vettura libera, la fermò, vi saltò dentro. Salvo... Dio mio, salvo! Si passò le mani sul viso come per riacquistare gli spiriti perduti, si palpò le braccia, le spalle. Era lui, ancora lui, Paolo Gavini, giovanotto di buona famiglia, studente a Torino, uomo libero e sano, senza catene, con un lieto avvenire. Il senso d'inesprimibile sollievo di cui godette in quel momento gli ispirò una certa indulgenza per l'umanità, quella stessa umanità che poco prima

gli faceva paura e lo muoveva a odio, le donne perdute comprese. Queste poi che nella loro maternità sciagurata e abbandonata dovevano fare quello che lui, uomo, aveva fatto eccezionalmente quella sera, gli facevano pietà.

— Disgraziate... — egli disse — non si pensa mai a queste cose!

Credeva fosse tardissimo: quasi che la notte intera fosse passata in quell'angoscia, ma vide in piazza Solferino, la gente che usciva allora dal teatro Alfieri. Ciò gli ispirò dei pensieri allegri: l'indomani anche lui sarebbe andato a teatro, e poi gli altri giorni ancora si sarebbe rifatto a usura dei tormenti di quella sera!

Rientò in casa leggero leggero, camminando in punta di piedi. La sua stanza illuminata era adesso allegra, sgombra di riflessi giallastri e sinistri, di ombre paurose, di occhi minacciosi, di incubi febbrili. Egli si spogliò in fretta, sbattè allegramente le scarpe sul pavimento e si sdraiò sotto le coltri pensando che l'indomani poteva fare il tempo che voleva, non glie ne importava più nulla... E chiuse gli occhi.

Ma appena li ebbe chiusi, ecco che vide nella stanza... Non ombre paurose, non occhi minacciosi, non riflessi d'incubi... No, ma quel povero pacco qualunque, legato con spago grossolano, là sulla sedia accanto all'armadio... Il cuore prese a battergli forte, con mano tremante egli premette il bottone della luce, guardò. Ma che pacco! Non

e' era nulla di nulla! Che gli venisse adesso decisamente la malattia della paura? Rimase immobile a guardare nel vuoto, con un gonfio puntato sul guanciale.

— No — disse qualcosa di grave dentro di lui — non è paura adesso...

Egli sapeva bene che non era paura. E il pensiero terribile, il più forte, il più segreto, quello che l'aveva maggiormente tormentato in tutte quelle ore sciagurate, senza che egli osasse mai confessarlo, più forte della paura, dell'ira, del ribrezzo, gli scoppì nel cervello come una folgore, lo costrinse a subirlo, ad accettarlo, ad ammetterlo, così com'era, rovente e fiammeggiante. Sì, il bambino era suo. Aveva sentito che era suo, fin quando la donna l'affermava iriosamente ed egli respingeva con alterigia e disprezzo quella paternità di cui non *doveva* essere sicuro. Qualcosa nel suo intimo, un istinto che non falliva, quel Paolo che aveva dentro di sé, puro ancora e sincero, gli l'aveva detto: — È tuo! E quel che dice questa donna è vero! Ma egli non aveva voluto piegare. Il Paolo di tutti i giorni, il ragazzo di mondo, l'uomo che vedeva davanti a sé il proprio avvenire, l'egosta ragioniatore, si era ribellato. Tutti gli uomini avrebbero fatto come lui in quel caso! Di che cosa era dunque colpevole?

— Era tuo... — ripeté dentro di lui una voce spietata. Ne era certo. Ciò ch'egli aveva gettato nel fiume freddo e gonfio di pioggia, era carne

della sua carne, sangue del suo sangue e ora quel lembo di vita uccisa giaceva nelle torride profondità di quell'acqua e nulla al mondo l'avrebbe fatto rivivere più. Aveva fatto un piccolo tonfo, null'altro... Tutta la notte egli pensò a quel tonfo che risonava nel suo cuore come un grido disperato...

Ancora molti anni dopo, talvolta, la mattina, al suo primo risvegliarsi, una voce intema, senza suono, ma dolente e profonda, ripeteva a Paolo Cavini:

— Hai ucciso tuo figlio... Tu l'hai ucciso!...

MANCANZA DI SERIETÀ

Nessuno scompiglio, nessuno strepito, niente delle solite agitazioni che sconvolgono le case in simili occasioni: tranquillità completa. La mattina, appena alzata, Augusta, lasciandosi cadere su di una poltrona, aveva balbettato, guardandosi attorno smarrita e torcendosi le mani, con un gesto convulso:

— Credo... credo di sentirmi più male del solito...

— Bene!... — aveva esclamato maestosamente la suocera. — Benissimo... Vuol dire che ci siamo...

E tutto era stato sistemato in pochi momenti, con un accorgimento, un'esperienza di gente seria, che non perde la testa in nessuna circostanza: la levatrice chiamata, la cognata vedova accorsa, la cognata zitella mandata da una vicina, le serve all'erta, il succero nella stanza da pranzo, pronto alle chiamate. Claudio, il marito, più pallido e accigliato del consueto, si rifaceva davanti allo specchio e con mani nervose il nodo della cravatta e pensava intanto se doveva o no andare all'uffi-

cio. Era un uomo giovane, alto ma un po' tozzo, coi capelli neri e i baffi biondi, quasi rossicci, gli occhi scuri e rotondi, un gran naso aquilino, la mascella quadrata, con un'espressione di presunzione soddisfatta e di solenne severità. Vestiva con un'eleganza barale.

— Decisamente non ci vado... — egli deliberò tra di sé ed entrò nella camera di sua moglie, cercando di dare al suo volto un'aria di circostanza, compunta ed incoraggiante ad un tempo. Egli pensava:

— Augusta è talmente sprovvista di coraggio e di serietà!... Talmente facile a lasciarsi abbattere!...

La chiamò con un tono di voce che voleva essere carezzevole ed imperativo insieme, il tono che usava, un tempo, per far stare sulle zampe posteriori un cagnolino che egli voleva ammaestrare.

— Su, Augusta, su! Coraggio!...

Ella, che camminava per la camera, sorrretta sotto le ascelle da due donne, mentre le altre si affacciavano a preparare il letto di dolore, volse a guardarlo, in silenzio, il viso livido, dove gli occhi avevano lo sguardo supplice e atterrito d'un animalletto preso ad un laccio e la bocca era con tratti in una smorfia di pianto trattenuto. E certo, mai più egli avrebbe dimenticato quel volto, quella espressione di creatura abbandonata, più stizzante che mai in mezzo a tanta gente.

Con un certo impaccio senti che i suoi incorag-

giamenti erano forse insufficienti e comprese di essere in quei momenti il personaggio più inutile di tutta la casa.

Sua madre — viso pallido, capelli neri, occhi rotondi, naso aquilino, la stessa espressione di durezza sul volto, la stessa statura, lo stesso portamento — gli andò incontro con un'aria di matrona esperta.

— Va, va — gli disse. — Tu non sei necessario. Puoi ritornare verso le sette, non prima.

Obbediente, egli se ne andò, con aria grave, senza poter soffocare una certa inquietudine: — Se Augusta avesse più coraggio... ei si diceva. — Se mi rassomigliasse un poco!

Ma Augusta non gli rassomigliava per nulla. Anzi, quella diversità così visibile tra di loro era cagione di uno stupore profondo per chi li conosceva. — Ma come hanno fatto a sposarsi?

Questo se lo domandava anche con voce nasale e fronte accigliata, la madre di Claudio, la quale di solito soggiungeva: — Mio figlio che è sempre stato così serio fin da bambino!...

Era verissimo: fin da bambino Claudio aveva preso la vita sul serio, pareva un uomo fin d'allora, e un uomo di cattivo umore, costantemente occupato dei lavori di scuola, come più tardi dei suoi doveri d'ufficio, sempre col naso sui quaderni, sem-

pre attento a non lasciarsi copiare dai vicini, imbronciato e grave. Non rideva mai, con faceva mai chiasso e guardava talvolta, con aria severa, suo padre che tentava di raccontare a tavola qualche barzelletta udita da un collega.

— Mi rassomiglia Claudio — diceva la madre con orgoglio — mi rassomiglia più ancora degli altri figliuoli. E come mai un giovane simile ha potuto sposare una ragazza come Augusta?...

Non che Augusta fosse una sposa disprezzabile, tutt'altro: giovane, sana, illibata, cresciuta in provincia, figlia unica, con una dote discreta e una graziosa persona per di più, alta e sottile, con un fascio di capelli castagni, un viso bianco, rotondo, a fossette, il mento largo e diviso, due grosse labbra rosse e gli occhi azzurri, sereni, ridenti. Ecco, ridenti, per l'appunto, troppo ridenti! L'avevano viziata, lo confessava ella stessa; i suoi genitori ascoltavano in estasi le sue risate da ragazza come avevano ascoltato per l'addietro i suoi cinguettii di bambina; l'avevan tirata su a funa di carezze e di baci, senza parlarle mai di tristezze, nè di miserie, nè di doveri, felici di contemplarla mentre mangiava o dormiva, di sentirla al pianoforte, di vederla saltellare per la casa, magari su di un piede solo, di sentirla ridere con le amiche, o chiacchierare ai canarini, davanti alla gabbia, nel balcone pieno di fiori. Non domandavano altro alla loro figliuola, null'altro che di essere così bella e graziosa, di conservare quel suo tenero cuore, di

saper dispensare con tanta dolcezza i baci e di amare e ridere...

Oh, un'educazione sbagliata, assolutamente sbagliata, da cima a fondo! La madre di Claudio, allorchè la nuora era entrata in casa, fresca come un vento di primavera, con gli occhi ancora umidi per le lacrime versate alla separazione dei suoi genitori, ma le labbra già schinse al sorriso, era rimasta un poco interdetta ed aveva subito pensato:

— La ragazza non dev'essere stata educata con molta serietà... — Più tardi, avendo comunicato al figliuolo questo dubbio, si era tranquillizzata un poco sentendosi rispondere:

— Ebbene, mamma, le riferemo l'educazione. In fondo Augusta è di buona pasta.

Sì, essa era di buona pasta, forse fin troppo tenera, fin troppo malleabile per quelle dure mani. Anche lei, appena era entrata nella nuova casa, aveva sentito che non tutti i genitori rassomigliavano ai suoi, i quali ora piangevano, poveretti, nella loro casa deserta; ma la giocondità era così spontanea nell'anima sua, che ella non aveva potuto subito uniformarsi alla fredda serietà di quell'ambiente dove non si rideva mai e non si diceva mai una parola più del necessario. Per un poco ella aveva seguitato a ridere, a correre da una finestra all'altra, a chiacchierare, a offrire, intorno, le carezze delle sue mani bianche, i baci della sua fresca bocca, con una mancanza di serietà, oh! una mancanza di serietà che scandalizzava tutti

quanti. E tutti, i suoceri, il marito, la cognata vedova, che era malinconica, e la cognata zitella, che era nervosa, si erano messi, con un impegno, uno zelo, un ardore, a infonderle quella serietà mancante, che ad una ad una le risate erano state soffocate, i sorrisi spenti, la mano che offriva le carezze si era abituata a ricadere in grembo, la fresca bocca aveva imparato a tacere e gli occhi a vedere le cose in un altro modo. C'era voluto una bella fatica, ma insomma, quell'educazione era stata rifatta. Ora non c'era male: Augusta sapeva muoversi e parlare a tempo, e i suoi occhi pieni di timore si fissavano sempre sul volto del marito, come per leggervi i comandi e gli ordini, che ella doveva eseguire.

— Sol tanto — s'ostinava a pensare Claudio, sempre sotto il peso di quella certa iniquitudine — soltanto, s'ella avesse un po' più di coraggio...

E sospirò, scrollando il capo e riconoscendo che il coraggio, soprattutto in quelle circostanze, era più difficile a infondersi della serietà.

Era giunto macchinalmente davanti al suo ufficio, vi entrò. L'usciera sonnecchiava nell'anticamera; due impiegati, i più giovani, approfittando dell'assenza straordinaria del padrone, sicuri di non vederlo che all'indomani, se n'erano andati; vi era soltanto il più anziano, un vecchio leggermente

sordo, ex-militare, dritto, impalato, con un viso immobile, rugoso, dagli occhi piccoli, sfuggenti, velati di tristezza. Era un ottimo impiegato, taciturno, attivo, preciso come una macchina. Vedendo entrare il padrone si alzò, ma non ebbe il menomo movimento di stupore quando Claudio, con una cordialità assolutamente insolita, gli batté una mano sulla spalla e gli disse:

— Ci siamo, capitano...

— Bene, bene... — rispose il vecchio con la sua voce bassa e uguale. — Un maschio, signor ingegnere?

— Ah, non si sa ancora...

E Claudio si mise a ridere.

— Fino a stasera non si saprà nulla, così almeno dice mia madre, che se ne intende...

— Sicuro... sicuro...

— Fino a stasera...

Il capitano si era rimesso a lavorare, a testa bassa, e Claudio aveva tentato d'imitarlo, ma non gli riusciva; sentiva, come mai gli era accaduto, il bisogno di parlare, di muoversi, di comunicare con qualcuno, guardando ad ogni momento l'orologio, impaziente e stupito di vedere che il tempo passava così lento. Tuttavia si vinse e sedette al suo posto. Che diavole! Voleva, proprio lui, dare uno spettacolo di così poca serietà? Sedette, ma invece di scrivere, puntò i gomiti sullo scrittoio, appoggiò il mento sulle mani e incominciò a parlare al capitano, che non rispondeva mai, ma crol-

lava di tanto in tanto il capo, approvando rispettosamente.

— ... un maschio o una femmina... in fondo mi è indifferente. Questo non importa niente, quello che importa è l'educazione, capitano. E l'educazione bisogna incominciarla presto... quasi, si può dire, dai primi giorni di vita del bambino. Il bambino si accorge subito se può dominare o se sarà dominato, sente subito la forza della mano che lo deve guidare. Ah, vi assicuro che noi avremo la mano solida, capitano! Non dico di mia moglie che, poveretta... sì, è diversa da noi, è stata allevata in un altro ambiente... per quanto ora si sia uniformata... sì, insomma, ma è un po' diversa. Del resto, non sarà lei destinata a dirigere questa educazione: sarò io. E vi assicuro che mio figlio non diventerà uno di questi giovanetti, che a sedici anni han già la chiave del portone e possono andare al Caffè concerto o a giocare e che mia figlia non diventerà simile a queste ragazze che girano per la strada con le sottane strette e i tacchi alti, invece di stare a casa a far la calza...

Si scagliava contro la gioventù odierna, contro la debolezza dei genitori, contro la leggerezza universale e diventava eloquente e nella sua voce si sentiva la soddisfazione, la voluttà aspra di colui che ha sempre avuto in avversione tutte le gioie della vita e potrà finalmente esercitare sopra due esseri che gli appartengono, le delizie della severità implacabile, della contraddizione sistematica,

della tirannia illimitata. Egli la pregustava di già quella gioia, mentre ripeteva col suo sorriso soddisfatto: — La mano solida, è vero, capitano?

— E' vero, è vero...

— E poi, non son cose nuove per lei, antico militare. Non è pure stato così con la sua famiglia?...

A tutta prima il vecchio non rispose, poi egli disse, con una voce che parve più stanca e più spenta:

— Io ho avuto la disgrazia di perdere tutta la mia famiglia e di restar solo... Allora è un'altra cosa, signor ingegnere, e si vede tutto in una maniera diversa...

Tacque. Un freddo era passato nell'aria e Claudio rabbrivì, si accigliò, diventò subitamente muto e si mise a scrivere con uno sforzo di volontà. Vi fu un lungo silenzio, qualche ora trascorse ed a sera fatta il capitano se ne andò, dopo aver messo in ordine le sue carte. Claudio rimase ancora per un momento, solo, poi ritornò a casa, a passo lento: non voleva giungere nè troppo presto, nè troppo tardi, a tempo.

Giunse a tempo per vedere la casa sottosopra, gli uscì spalancati, il volto atterrito di sua madre, che gli corse incontro affannata, tremante:

— Ora... il delitto... improvvisamente... Ab-

biamo telefonato, non c'eri più... La bambina è nata morta...

— Ma chi è che canta così ora? — gridò lui, stringendo i denti.

— E' lei...

Nel letto, Augusta, col viso stravolto, cantava a squarciagola, interrompendosi tratto tratto per ridere con un'orribile gaiezza; scoteva, squassava il capo sul guanciaie e stringeva a sè qualcosa di informe e di livido, un fagottino che a tutta prima Claudio non disinsse.

— Che è?

— La bambina...

Il marito, stringendosi il capo tra le mani, si curvò sulla moglie e la chiamò:

— Augusta!

Ella non rispose, e pure lo guardò e rise, e poi guardò gli altri e rise ancora... Pareva che li sfidasse tutti con ebrezza, con ironia... Poi non vide più nessuno. Guardava lontano, nel buio, nel vuoto, e vedeva un trionfo di sole, uno scintillare di raggi, di campi d'oro, di fiori scarlati, e udiva il canto delle allodole, dei suoi canarini, vedeva il suo balcone fiorito, un mondo lontano, superba-mente allegro, verso il quale ella correva leggera leggera, col viso levato, i capelli sferzati dal vento, la sua bambina stretta al petto, cantando di gioia come una schiava liberata.

L'OSCURA PASSIONE

Quando la signora Costanza arrivò per prenderla e portarla via, Elena era sola in una sala del pianterreno, seduta in un angolo, immobile, con le mani in grembo, che si guardava intorno come una smemorata. La madre, dalla soglia, la riconobbe a stento e la chiamò piano, con un singhiozzo:

— Elena!... Che cosa fai?

Elena la vide venire incontro senza stupore; invece di balzar su ad abbracciarla, mormorò lamentosamente:

— Mi hanno lasciata qui sola...

A vederla ridotta in quello stato, magra, distrutta, coi capelli strati di grigio, col viso emaciato, grosso come un pugno, le labbra secche, lo sguardo smarrito, tutta la persona come rimpicciolita, la signora Costanza sentì piantarsi una spada nel cuore.

— Non me l'hanno potuto assassinare — pensò — ma me l'hanno stupidita.

Ella si pose a parlarle dolcemente, lentamente, quasi temesse di non essere compresa bene.

— Su, coraggio, coraggio. Ormai tutto è fatto,

tutto è finito. Non si può dire che si sia ottenuta facilmente questa separazione, ma, infine, si è ottenuta. Liberata, sei liberata! Puoi venir via con me subito, anzi devi venire... E i bauli? E la tua roba? Non hai preparato niente? Non hai niente, dici? Ben, tanto meglio. Vieni via così. E lui dov'è?...

Il marito era lontano, a caccia.

— E lei?

La suocera era al piano superiore, chiusa nelle sue stanze. La casa — una cascaccia di campagna che somigliava ad un vecchio castello diroccato e ad una cascina insieme — pareva vuota e, con quelle finestre chiuse, quelle grandi stanze squallide e fredde, quel silenzio profondo, di tomba, aveva un non so che di lugubre che stringeva il cuore. Ad un tratto si udì camminare furtivamente nella stanza accanto, bisbigliare sommessamente, un sussurrio che si avvicinava e si allontanava: erano le serve che spiavano. Uno stalliere si affacciò alla porta, poi attraversò in silenzio il cortile rustico e deserto e spalancò l'uscio della scuderia: si udì il rumor secco delle zampe dei cavalli e un nitrire acuto...

La signora Costanza rabbrivì: le pareva di essere entrata in quella casa sinistra come si cade in una trappola e si guardava alle spalle, tremando, col terrore di chi teme di vedersi da un momento all'altro atorniato di nemici.

E dire che Elena aveva vissuto là dentro dieci

lungli anni, dieci anni foschi di umiliazioni, di vergogne, di dolori e di lacrime! Non vedeva l'ora di andarsene la signora Costanza e non trasse un respiro di sollievo, se non quando si ebbe trascinata via la figliuola infagottata alla meglio in uno scialle, con un cappellino antiquato in testa e la vide installata accanto a sè, nel treno che le doveva portare ben lontane, a casa. Da quanto tempo la povera signora non aveva goduto un momento di gioia — triste gioia peraltro! — come questo! Non poteva dirsi fortunata lei, con le figliuole: La prima, Angelica, che le rassomigliava, era morta giovane, in pieno vigor di vita, sposa di pochi anni e madre da pochi mesi, lasciandole in eredità la figliuola diventata malaticcia; la seconda, Adele, fuggita di casa vergognosamente con un ignobile avventuriero, mai più aveva fatto ritorno alla casa paterna, era diventata una mediocre attrice, una famosa mondana e trascinava chissà dove la sua misera vita di rischi e di avventure. Ma nulla aveva superato in miseria il fosco destino dell'ultima, di Elena. Fanciulla, durante una villeggiatura in una famiglia amica, si era innamorata di quel giovane il quale l'aveva chiesta quasi subito in isposa. La signora Costanza non ne era contenta, in fondo, ma il pretendente era di buona famiglia, discretamente ricco, bel giovane, per quanto di una bellezza un po' volgare, alto, forte, colorito, dal viso energico e duro, molto taciturno, quasi timido, di maniere riservate, di gusti semplici, vivendo assai in

campagna, con sua madre... Non gli si poteva dire di no a cuor leggero. E poi Elena ne era innamorata e questa era stata la ragione più forte. Così appena sposata, il marito l'aveva cacciata in quella casaccia di campagna, dove la poveretta, a detta dei vicini, dei servi e dei conoscenti, ne doveva aver viste di tutti i colori. La suocera era una vecchia arpia, gelosa della nuora, pronta a tutte le malignità, a tutte le infamie pur di sopraffarla, il marito non era che un rozzo contadino, un brutalissimo uomo, pieno di istinti crudeli e di malvagità complicate. Tra quei due, Elena, dominata, vilipesa e anche percossa, aveva condotto la più miserabile vita di schiava che mai si possa immaginare, perdendo ogni coscienza e ogni dignità di sé, diventando anche lei una rozza contadina, più trascinata dalle fantesche che servivano in casa, quasi senza ricordarsi di essere stata una giovane elegante della buona società. Pareva che egli si compiacesse di avvilirla in tutti i modi: una volta l'aveva battuta in presenza d'altri, un'altra volta l'aveva scacciata di casa lasciandola tremare di freddo nel cortile tutta una notte...

Queste cose la signora Costanza le aveva sapute da estranei. Così raffinata, generosa, impulsiva e sensibile com'era, la fine signora spasimava e gemeva di dolore, peggio che se avesse avuto davanti la figliuola distesa nella bara. E nonostante la paura che le ispirava il genero, ella si era buttata nella lotta, appassionatamente, ostinatamente, in

quella terribile lotta contro due malvagi, in quella lotta senza tregua che le costava la pace, la salute, il denaro e le faceva passare giorni desolati e notti orrende a piangere e a disperarsi come se non le riuscisse di strappare Elena da una caverna di briganti.

Qualche volta gli avvocati messi di mezzo si impazientivano e le dicevano alzando le braccia:

— Ma cara signora, bisognerebbe che sua figlia si movesse, si agitasse un po' di più! Non ci vorrebbe molto, infine! E' una donna, non è una pecora... Si direbbe quasi che quanto facciamo per lei non la interessi...

— E' una povera incosciente! — gemeva la signora Costanza. — E' abbruttita da quei due... E poi ha paura, probabilmente... Ho paura io, si figurino! Non ci sono mai andata laggiù e non ci vado, tanto son sicura che mi sparerebbe una fucilata nella schiena o me la farebbe sparare da qualcuno dei suoi bifolchi! E le intercettano di certo le mie lettere. No, no, bisogna finirla, doversi spendere l'ultimo centesimo e ridurmi alla miseria. Ringrazio soltanto Dio che il mio povero marito sia morto dieci anni fa, giusto quando Elena s'è sposata. Ah se avesse visto com'è riuscito quel maledetto matrimonio!

Di tanto in tanto, in risposta alle innumerevoli lettere della madre, Elena scriveva brevemente, vagamente, con una scrittura tutta scarabocchi che pareva quella di una bambina, con frasi scucite, in



curi ella si lamentava non si capiva bene di che, contraddicendosi subito dopo con altre frasi non meno incoerenti.

— Vedono? — diceva la signora Costanza che andava a legger la lettera agli avvocati. — Non sa neanche lei quel che si dice ed ha paura: lo si capisce subito!

E infine la lotta era finita quasi bruscamente: la suocera ormai era vecchia decrepita e non aveva più la forza di mordere e il marito forse si era scato di litigare per conservare una moglie da maltrattare e null'altro.

— Mi pare un sogno — disse la signora Costanza quando si vide Elena in casa, e piansero tutti quel giorno: i servi che l'avevan conosciuta giovinetta, la vecchia signorina Stella che aveva fatto da istitutrice a tutte e tre le figliuole ed ora lo era della nipote, Maria Luisa; perfìn questa, una soave diafana figurina d'inferna che aveva visto da piccola la zia, ma non se la ricordava affatto, pianse disperatamente a vederla, di gioia e di compassione insieme.

— Bisogna rifarle la vita, ora.

Così pensava e diceva la madre e tutti si davano d'attorno per rifar quella vita. La trattavano con riguardi infiniti, come una che abbia subito in dieci anni di prigionia, digiuni e torture d'ogni genere: le avevan data la camera più bella e più allegra, le sceglievano a tavola le carni più delicate, le mescevano i vini più generosi, ogni giorno la madre

le faceva trovare qualcosa sul tavolo di toeletta: un profumo squisito, o un mazzo di fiori rari, o un cartoccio di dolciumi... Tutti si affannavano a offrirle ristori e dolcezze. Ma non era facile rifar quella vita. Elena non mutava, non ingrassava e soprattutto non cambiava d'umore. Sempre con la stessa veste indosso, sempre patta e disseccata, col viso grosso come un pugno in cui gli occhi avevano uno sguardo fosco, le mani non curate, i capelli appena stretti in un piccolo nodo molto basso sulla nuca, con le ciocche che sfuggivano ciondolini sulle spalle e sulle orecchie senza che ella sentisse il bisogno di sollevarle, pareva sempre una contadina. Ah! l'orribile avvillimento di una creatura che era pure stata giovane, fiorente, bella, che aveva avuto il rispetto della sua persona, la coscienza del suo stato, che aveva amato le raffinatezze della vita! E quella donna dall'aspetto trascurato, senza decoro, senza dignità, piombata in quell'abbruttimento, trasognata come una sonnambula, taciturna come se fosse diventata muta, svogliata e indifferente a tutto, sempre ricantucciata a guardar nel vuoto e a rodersi le unghie, era stata l'Elena d'un tempo, alla quale il bagno quotidiano pareva più indispensabile del pane!

Con sforzi costanti la madre cercava di risvegliare quell'anica coscienza. Ogni giorno, timidamente tentava qualche osservazione.

— Elena, non metti più acqua di Colonia nell'acqua quando ti lavi?

— Maria Luisa offri a Elena la tua polvere per le unghie : vedrai come te le fa di nuovo belle !

— Dovresti cambiar pettinatura Elena ; con un po' d'arte potresti nascondere benissimo quei capelli grigi.

Ed Elena ogni volta si stringeva nelle spalle e diceva :

— Ah, non importa niente... Non me ne importa niente di queste cose, sai mamma... Non ne ho voglia...

Non aveva voglia di niente Elena e si era tanto inselvatichita che scappava spaventata ogni volta che si annunciava qualche visita. Invano Maria Luisa le offriva di suonare insieme qualche pagina di musica, invano la signorina Stella si sacrificava a leggere forte pagine e pagine dei libri più recenti : nulla risvegliava quell'anima avvilita.

— Non ne ho voglia... — ella diceva e pensava a chissà che, rodendosi le unghie.

— Come me l'hanno ridotta ! — diceva costernata la signora Costanza : — Mi par che somigli a qualcuno quando sta così... A chi somiglia, Stella ?

La signorina Stella si ricordò a chi rassomigliava. Non aveva forse lo stesso atteggiamento abbando- nato, cupo e quasi folle di quella balia, la prima balia di Maria Luisa, che si era ammalata di nostalgia e di malinconia pensando al suo paese e al suo uomo e alla quale si era inaridito il seno ?

— E' vero ! è vero !

Lo stesso terribile abbruttimento, lo stesso aspetto di spostata...

— Nostalgia di che ?

La signora Costanza non osava indagare, ma ebbe una scossa quando Elena le disse, un giorno, con un suono di voce nuovo :

— Sai, è morta, lei...

— Tua suocera ? ... E come lo sai ?

— Me l'ha scritto lui...

— Ti scrive ? !...

— Una volta sola... Adesso è solo...

— E che te ne importa, ormai ?

Elena non rispose e la madre corse dalla signorina Stella.

— Sai ? ! Sai che le scrive ? Che ha questo coraggio ? Ma come le è giunta questa lettera ? Bisogna sorvegliare...

La signorina Stella sorvegliò e scoprì che quella specie di sordomuta era riuscita tuttavia a corrompere un servo il quale le consegnava le lettere del marito. Fulminata, la madre sospirò come in agonia :

— Non è dunque ancora finito !... Quell'uomo mi odia, si vuol vendicare... ma non me la strapierà. E poi Elena non si lascerà raggrare... Oh mio Dio !

Elena si chiudeva nella sua camera per rispondere al marito. Silenziosa, cauta, guardinga, guardandosi attorno ad ogni momento con aria cupamente sospettosa e pure pronta a difendersi, ella

scriveva, scriveva, scriveva... Con la stessa cautela si preparò a partire, ma sulla porta della camera, quella sera, mentre stava per fuggire, ella trovò la vecchia istitutrice.

— Elena, tu, ammazzi tua madre. Vieni, vieni a vederla. Non far pazzie... Ascolta chi ti vuol bene... Ci siamo accorte che vuoi fuggire così come una donna perduta... Tua madre ne morirà... Vieni almeno a sentire che cosa vuol dirti...

A malincuore, quasi con ripugnanza, Elena si lasciò trascinare nella sala accanto dove sua madre, adagiata su di una poltrona e pietosamente assistita dalla soave nipote spaventata, si teneva le mani sul cuore in tumulto e anelava, scotendo il capo riverso, pallida che pareva dovesse spirare da un momento all'altro. A veder la figliuola vestita, pronta per la partenza, ella trovò tanta forza da potersi rialzare un poco.

— Non è possibile — ella balbettò — non è possibile... Elena, quell'uomo ti inganna... Egli ti rivuole per torturarti di nuovo e per farmi morire di crepacuore. Non credergli Elena!

— Sai... — rispose la figlia appena impacciata, guardando a terra. — Ora è cambiato... non ha più la madre... Sarà un'altra cosa, vedrai. Tu esageri... hai sempre esagerato... E poi è mio marito...

— E che vuol dire?...

— E' mio marito e il mio dovere...

— Elena! Nessuno ha mai avuto il dovere di

lasciarsi assassinare! Ma pensa a quel che hai sofferto! Pensa a quel che ho sofferto io, a quanto ho fatto per strapparti a loro! E per niente avrei dovuto farlo, per rivederti tornare laggiù, così, per volontà tua...

Le lacrime le soffocarono la voce, le grondarono dagli occhi, le rigarono il volto, rapidamente.

Elena sospirò, inghiottì la saliva, con fatica, si guardò intorno e disse ancora, ciecamente ostinata, occupata di un solo pensiero, presa da un solo desiderio:

— Infine, è mio marito. Vuole che ritorni. Mi aspetta...

La signora Costanza si asciugò il volto, si drizzò in piedi.

— No! Così agisce una pazza o una... Se sei pazza, io ti farò trattenere per forza... Sei separata legalmente capisci? E io ho il diritto di trattenerli. Il dovere, anzi. Tu sei pazza, dunque, Elena?

— Non sono pazza — rispose la figlia, bruscamente. — E sono padrona di far quel che mi piace. Io voglio tornare con mio marito. Se scappavo così era per evitare scene, ma ormai, giacché debbo dichiararlo, lo dichiaro: voglio tornare.

Ci fu un lungo, affannoso silenzio. Poi la vecchia signora parlò con voce tremante.

— L'avete dunque udita? L'hai sentita, Maria Luisa, angelo mio? Stella, amica mia, l'hai sentita? Vuol tornare laggiù. Ci vuol lasciare, noi,

che abbiamo consumato metà della nostra fortuna e che avremmo data la vita per lei... Noi che l'abbiamo supplicata quasi in ginocchio di lasciarsi curare, nutrire, divertire e adorare... Questa casa dove tutti l'amano, la servono e la rispettano vuol lasciarla... Questa casa onorata dove si vive in pace, ella vuole abbandonarla... Preferisce tornarsene là, in prigione, in quella cascaccia infame dove sarà derisa, calpestata, vilipesa e battuta, sì, battuta! E' vero che la preferisci?

— E' la casa di mio marito quella... è la mia casa...

— No, sai, nessuno preferisce il buio alla luce, il lezzo al profumo, il letame alle rose, a meno... sì, a meno d'esser depravati. Non dirmi che vuoi bene a quell'uomo, perchè se fosse vero...

— Lo è! — disse, feramente, la figlia. — E devo voler bene a mio marito...

— Ah la bella ragione! La buona scusa! Vedi: in questo momento mi pare che tu tornando a tuo marito disonori la tua casa mille volte più di tua sorella Adele quando fuggì, come te, vergognosamente, come te, con un amante che era un avventuriero, viveva di ginoco e d'intrigo, ma che mi pare adesso un nobile gentiluomo in confronto di quel bifolco ubbriacone di tuo marito, vizioso e crudele. Sei dunque degna di lui tu, giacchè lo ami? Sai che cosa sei dunque, se lo ami?

Si guardarono per un momento madre e figlia: la vecchia alta e imponente, fiammeggiava di indi-

gnazione, l'altra piccola e umile, stava rannicchiata come se volesse scomparire sotto terra, eppure si sentiva che la madre non avrebbe vinto, che la figlia non avrebbe ceduto.

— Sai che cosa sei?... Una femmina!...

— Nonna!... — balbettò Maria Luisa atterrita, senza comprendere l'insulto. La signorina Stella si mise a piangere, vedendo l'altra oscurarsi in volto, guardare la madre di sotto in su, lo stesso sguardo pauroso e la stessa mossa vile che faceva quando suo marito alzava la mano a percuoterla.

— Una femmina! Vattene!...

Ella scomparve, fulminea e la madre ricadde a sedere. Nel cupo silenzio che seguì, la signorina Stella seguì a piangere silenziosamente, Maria Luisa a tremare come una foglia e la signora Costanza a guardare con gli occhi asciutti e ardenti la porta da cui quella figlia indegna se n'era andata, per sempre.