Two Stories By
Malaparte

From *Kaputt*

Translated from the Italian by
Joel White

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From *Kaputt*

Then Europa surrendered
To the lie of the Beast
And her maiden's face drained bloodless
At seas become infested with monsters
And all the phantasms of the deep

Horace
Odes 3.27

Introduction To The First Story

I mention in the other introduction that Malaparte is master of The Shaggy Dog Story; and in this piece, originally titled *Mad Guns*, the story literally involves a shaggy dog.

The translation work began when I learned, to my shock, that the English translation of *Kaputt* doesn't include it. It was never translated. I have no idea why. It's the only story that wasn't. In a project with a colleague, Aleksandar Zograf/Saša Rakezić, he used excerpts from the Serbo-Croatian translation in a work for the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, Serbia; so I picked up an English copy of *Kaputt* and found it wasn't there, and never had been. So, I took it upon myself to translate it, as it's one of the few accounts of the Luftwaffe bombing of Belgrade in April, 1941.

There is a lot of historical background to it, so it's deceptively simple. There is no explanation of why the Luftwaffe is bombing Belgrade, who anyone is, or what their roles are. Malaparte does this all the time in his stories: he introduces names, places and people as if we all know who they are already. He mentions neighborhoods, regions, outlying areas without explanation.

The locations in this story are all real places, accurately described. I've personally been to all the locations he describes in this story, so I know where they all are and can visualize them; but I suspect the average Western reader will have no clue where any of this takes place. I considered including a map, but decided against it. The whole subject is just too complex, and events described in the story occurred too quickly: in a matter of days. The region is obscure to a great many people, even well-educated Europeans who might be expected to know.

There are descriptions of behaviors that likely will upset some people.

The issue, for me, is veracity. Is any, or most, of this factual? Malaparte is one of those guys who bends, even distorts the 'truth' (whatever that is) to tell a compelling story; and many of his assertions can't necessarily be taken at face value. His goal in his stories is to portray a Truth, or a truth as he perceives it, to thread together a series of descriptions that don't so much describe surface things but penetrates to the meaning of them, and the true character of the people and events he describes. So his stories are often 'untrue' in a strict sense.

As a result, to use a Malaparte Story as a factual historical narrative is an iffy thing.

For me, the question of veracity is less about Malaparte and his colorfully embroidered observations, but rather about the other character: Mameli. To determine the facts of the matter, and if, and how much, Malaparte exaggerated or embellished, the issue was whether he was accurately describing not so much his own experiences but what Mameli told him. Was he willing to misquote Mameli, to put words in his mouth he didn't actually say?

In researching this second subject, to determine if he represented a reliable source, I finally decided that Francesco Giorgio Mameli was not a man one is going to casually misrepresent. Unusually for a research subject, I found I like him very much. He was what one would term 'a stand-up guy'.

Deeply religious, and by all accounts an almost pathologically brave soldier, he obviously held ideas about personal and societal *honor* that made him a formidable individual.

To briefly recount, after the experience in Yugoslavia, he was appointed to Bulgaria, where he was again bombed, this time by Allied planes. He was interned when Italy's government split and the Fascist Salo faction sent new diplomatic staff; he continued as if nothing had happened. When Bulgaria entered the war on the Allied side, he traveled from his isolated internment compound, at great risk to himself, back to Sofia to establish *personal relations* with the Soviets, despite having no official title or position. He engaged in assisting Italians held in German POW camps to escape; on finally being reinstated as a diplomat, he didn't hesitate to take on the USSR to advocate for Italian interests, with a particular focus on Italian POWs in the Soviet Union.

The guy was absolutely fearless.

He exemplifies the phrase, 'Death Before Dishonor'.

Mameli took on Hitler, Stalin, and an army of other nefarious figures; he just didn't care.

In the context of his personality, Spin's behavior was deeply concerning to him, and this knowledge of Mameli's character, beliefs, and approach to life explains a great deal about the story. In the end, I decided that it was highly unlikely that even Malaparte would misquote or misrepresent Mameli. If Mameli said it, it's without question true, and I don't believe Malaparte, even with his known propensity to weaving tales, was willing to mischaracterize the man.

I wouldn't.

I did add and/or change some things, in an honest effort to clarify and explain certain aspects of the stage on which the story is played; and actions on that stage. Malaparte is an impressionistic writer, a teller of stories, and I saw and see no reason not to proceed in the same spirit; to accept the ethos of that, and carefully embroider myself; as long as the basic facts of the matter remain. Again, some of the behaviors described may upset some people, particularly Yugoslavs/Serbs, some of whom will likely be unhappy with some of the described.

There is a national Myth (Myth in the sense of not being untrue, but in the sense of Founding Myth, a different thing altogether) in now Ex-Yugoslavia that The People overthrew their pro-Fascist monarchy, and bravely and unflinchingly defied the Nazi War Machine. This story paints a picture that's not quite so… infused with nobility.

This aspect of the story is why I spent so much time researching the character of Malaparte's primary source Mameli. I came to the conclusion that Mameli is the kind of man who would die rather than betray his honor; and if he described it, it's factual, and that Malaparte, regardless of his usual embellishing habits, would not misquote his source in any significant way.

The foundation of this story is a description of events as told to Curzio Malaparte, by his friend Mameli. If Mameli says it happened, it assuredly happened.

Curzio Malaparte

Luftwaffe bombing of Belgrade, 1941

King Petar II Bridge, center spans blown

Bombed Belgrade

Giorgio Mameli

Potiphar’s Wife

GOD OF THE GUN

One

On April 6, 1941, when the German Luftwaffe's bombing of Yugoslavia began, Francesco Giorgio Mameli, Extraordinary Envoy and Plenipotentiary Minister of Italy in Belgrade, was in his residence within the Italian Legation and called for his dog, a handsome three-year-old English Spaniel named 'Spin'.

"Spin, let's go, *now*! Right away!"

Spin was huddled below a triptych of portraiture in a corner, as if to beg sanctuary from the images of authority: King Victor Emmanuel III, Pope Pius XII, and Il Duce Benito Mussolini. He refused to approach his master, calling to him from the doorway. Francesco Giorgio Mameli, Extraordinary Envoy and Plenipotentiary Minister of Italy in Belgrade, became more insistent.

"Spin, we have to go to the shelter!"

Spin understood from Mameli's tone that there really was cause for fear; Spin began to whimper and whine, to stare around with wild, bewildered eyes, then pissed the carpet under himself.

He was a beautiful dog, Spin, a perfectly proportioned, purebred spaniel of noble heritage, and he had a single passion: hunting. Mameli often took Spin out on excursions for birds in the hills and forests surrounding Belgrade, along the banks of Danube, or on those islets in the middle of the river before Belgrade, between Pančevo and Zemun.

Mameli would take one of his finely fitted shotguns off the rack on the wall, sling it on his shoulder, and cheerfully announce, "Spin, come!"

The dog, transformed with excitement, would bark joyfully; and whenever Spin passed through the corridor where Mameli hung his guns, cartridge pouches, and hand-tooled English leather game bags, Spin would raise his eyes and furiously wag his tail.

But on April 6, 1941, the morning of bombs descending on Belgrade, Spin felt only fear, and he wasn't the only one. The crash of bombs was shattering. The Italian Legation, located not far from the old Royal Palace, was shaken to its foundations by terrible explosions. Chunks of rubble fell from the arches and long cracks appeared in the walls and ceilings.

"Let's go, Spin! Quickly! Now!"

Spin finally rose and hurried down the stairs to the Legation's shelter with his tail between his legs, whining and pissing all over the descending steps.

The Italian Legation's bomb shelter was a simple underground cube with a dirt floor. There hadn't been sufficient warning, time, to prop it up with perhaps a few beams, to engineer a bunker with wooden supports and cement, to construct and build a vault with scaffolding and concrete columns between reinforced floor and roof. There were no such things and it was just a cellar. From a small aperture at street level, a dull, dust-filled shaft of light penetrated.

The cellar was lined with wooden, rustic shelves filled with flasks of chianti, bottles of French wine, whisky, cognac, and gin. The ceiling was festooned with prosciutto from the Friulians of San Daniele, salami from Lombard. It was a mouse's nest. One direct hit with a single 50-kilogram bomb would have been enough to immure forever all the officials of the Italian Legation, together with Spin the dog.

It was 07:20, Sunday Morning, April 6 1941, and Spin ran down the steps whining and moaning with fear. He had passed through the corridor and raised his eyes to the wall, where his master's guns were all in their proper places. Therefore the huge crashes weren't gunshots, but something new and strange, abnormal, absolutely inhuman, foreign from Spin's known order.

The entire ground swayed as if from an earthquake. The houses clashed together, rattled back and forth; there was the horrendous roar of collapsing walls, the shattering of window panes, broken glass crashing on the sidewalks, and screams of terror; crying, weeping, shouts for help, and the bellowing of unreasoning herds of mammals on the run.

The stench of sulfur began to penetrate into the Legation's cellar, along with the smoke of explosions and fires. Bombs fell on Terazije, on the Plaza Spomenik, on the old Royal Palace. Lines of cars marked with the emblems of generals, ministers, court dignitaries, judges, and high officials careened and jockeyed through the debris-littered streets at top speed. Wild panic had possessed the authorities and civil and military officials, such that they abandoned everything and everyone in their Capital and ran.

By around 10:00 AM Belgrade, the White City, was on its own.

Then the looting began.

Individuals swelled into groups, then coalesced into a true mob; and then they came from Zemun, from Pančevo, from Krnjača across the Danube River: criminals, opportunistic bands, student revolutionaries, the truly poor; they came from outlying areas and mixed with fearless gypsies. They ripped the shutters from the shops and broke in to steal from wealthy homes. The rattle of small arms could be heard from Terazije. Citizens and

looters shot it out, grappled, gunned in the streets; they battled up and down the stairs of buildings, on landings, inside apartments.

In Spomenik Square the Royal Theater burned. The bakery in front of the theater, across the square, fell. It was an ancient Turkish establishment famed throughout the Balkans, its sweets and cakes legendary for their aphrodisiac qualities.

A shrieking mob of hysterical women swarmed through the heated, smoking scenario, grappling with each other. Disheveled, clothing askew and torn, faces gleaming, they deafened the air with obscene shouts and crazed laughter, stuffing exciting pastries into their overflowing mouths, smearing each other's faces, chewing and screaming through the creamy confections.

The huge crashes, the roar of ruined walls falling, shouts of laughter, screams of terror, the pop of gunfire, the wild crackle and roar of fires: Spin heard them all with his tail tucked between his legs, ears held low, shaking, moaning, and whining. Spin crouched between the feet of his master and pissed on his shoes.

Around noon, most of the planes left and the roar of bombs died down a little. A dust-covered Francesco Giorgio Mameli, Extraordinary Envoy and Plenipotentiary Minister of Italy in Belgrade, along with his equally dust-covered Legation officials, went up to the ground floor. Spin refused to leave his refuge. They had to bring him something to eat down in the dark cellar full of fumes and smoke.

From Mameli's study, in moments of silence, were heard the fearful whimperings of Spin. Existence itself had imploded. Something terrifying, something supernatural, must have happened, and Spin could not comprehend it.

"The bombing is over," Mameli insisted to him each time he went to see him in the cellar. "You can come up now, the danger has passed!"

But Spin was afraid and refused to leave his hiding place. He wouldn't touch food, and he looked at even a plain bowl of soup with suspicious eyes, with the wary and pleading eyes of a dog who fears being betrayed by the familiar hand of his master. No human or natural law existed anymore.

Spin's world had collapsed.

About 4:00 in the afternoon of that same day, while Minister Mameli was preparing to go down to the cellar to try yet again to persuade Spin the danger was now over, to tell him everything was back in its proper place, in the usual traditional order, it was safe, there was a buzzing sound high in the sky from the directions of Zemun and Pančevo.

This new round of bombing fell first on parts of Knez Miloša Street. Screaming Stukas pounded 500-kilogram bombs into roofs as if driving nails with large hammers, in single, precise, lightning fast blows. The city trembled to its foundations. There was no refuge, nowhere was safe, and crowds fled screaming through the streets, knocked from one blast wave to another, perishing in heaps. Between the huge explosions, there was a great silence; everything was dead and breathless, motionless.

It was the silence when the world will pass away; the immense, cosmic silence of the Earth when it is cold and dead, when the final Apocalypse will be consummated. Then suddenly, a new hideous crash staggered the trees, the houses, and the sky collapsed over the city with a great rumble of maddened thunder.

Mameli and the Legation officials all returned to the cellar, and now sat in a little huddle on café chairs the waitstaff had arranged around a table. One heard only, between one massive explosion and the next, Spin's moans as he crouched between the legs of his master.

"It's the end of the world," said the Second Secretary, Princip Ruffo.

"And a real infernal Hell," said Minister Mameli. He placed his pipe on the table and instead lit a cigarette.

"All the forces of nature have been unleashed against us," said First Secretary Guidotti. "Nature has gone mad."

"There is nothing to be done," said Count Fabrizio Franco.

"We just have to do like the Romanians," said Minister Mameli. "As they say, '*Răbdare şi tutun': '*Patience, and tobacco'."

Spin heard these speeches and understood himself there was nothing to be done. Smoke and wait. But wait for what? Minister Mameli and the officials of the Legation knew certainly what they were sitting and waiting for: all of them pale and restless, smoking one cigarette, reflecting, waiting, looking up, then shrugging and smoking another. If at least they would let a single word slip that would reveal to Spin the meaning of, the solution to, this anguished anticipation.

The darkness in which Spin found himself, the events of the terrible day, and the reason for this agonizing wait, it all added to the terror of the enormous crashes of the bombs, and then a restlessness, a primal urge of panic? fed by awful uncertainty.

Not that Spin was a cowardly dog.

Spin was a good, brave, English purebred in the best sense of the word. He didn't have in his veins even one drop of bad blood. He was a good English dog trained in the best kennel in Sussex. He was afraid of nothing, not even of war. Spin was a dog bred for hunting; and war, as

everyone knows, is a shoot where men are, together, both hunters and game; a shoot in which men with guns hunt each other.

Spin wasn't afraid of gunshots: he would have held his head high against an entire regiment. Shots fired around him made him happy, excited, thrilled. Gunshots were part of the natural order of things, the traditional order of Spin's world.

Without gunshots what was life? What could life be, without those long runs in the meadows and in the thickets, in the hills beyond the Sava and the Danube, chasing after a scent stretched like a taught thread through fields and woods, balanced in the air like an acrobatic artiste on a high wire?

When the shot of Mameli's gun rang out in the clean, crisp morning air, when that voice sang its aria, and with a slight shudder shook the dew from the spider's web, the grass glistened from autumn drizzle, the natural order was revealed, and all turned perfectly in balance.

There was nothing ever missing from Spin's existence but the voice of the gun, to give the final touch to perfection of the natural order, of the world, and to life itself.

During long, chilly winter evenings, a time Mameli spent relaxed before a warming fire in his study, English Dunhill pipe between his teeth, forehead bent over the pages of a book; flame crackled happily in the fireplace, the wind whistled outside, rain poured down; Spin the English Spaniel hunting dog would nap peacefully on the carpet at his master's feet, and dream happily of the glassy brittleness of the morning air being broken by the crisp shot from the gun.

Spin would wake and raise his eyes to his favorite, an ancient, dignified, regal masterpiece of a gun that reposed in its rack, seated on its throne, in the corridor and Spin would thump his tail on the carpet of the study in anticipation of future hunts.

That gun was a hand-built *džeferdar,* with Turkish Miquelet lock, barrel elaborately engraved, stock heavily embellished with mother-of-pearl. Mameli had acquired it, or rather been selected by *him,* from a second-hand dealer at Monastir in Macedonia. He, the gun that is, had assuredly fired on the Christian Soldiers of the Prince Eugene Francis of Savoy–Carignano, on the Hungarian and Croatian cavaliers on horseback, galloping on the attack through the contested meadows of Zemun.

An old, faithful soldier, he had done his duty, he had done his part, he had helped to maintain the ancient, traditional order of Nature and, in his now-distant youth, he had put the final touch of the perfection of the World on that day when his sharp report had shattered the glass of the

morning air and a young Hungarian or Croatian Christian Ulan had fallen from his mount, there in Zemun, in Novi Sad, in Vukovar.

Spin could not conceive of a world without the gun. As long as the voice of the gun reigned, nothing would disturb the order, the harmony, the perfection of the known natural order.

But the horrible, overpowering noise that morning had made Spin's world collapse. It was not, could not, be the friendly, familiar, structuring voice of the gun. It was a voice never heard before, the new and terrifying voice of some hideous monster, some alien. A Pagan god, whose existence was previously unsuspected, had overthrown the kingdom of the gun; the omnipotent gun who until that day had ruled the world in benevolent order and harmony. Now the previously sovereign voice of the gun would remain silent forever, deposed in a savage, primitive roar of regicide.

Now Mameli, as he appeared in those cruel, struggling moments in the imagination of the dog Spin, was that of an image projected against the backdrop of the ruined natural order, in that shattered world, but no longer that of his beloved master: powerful and bold, sacred, majestic gun in his hands; but an awful picture of a little, thin, hunched man, grey, pallid and pale, who stumbled with a pathetic limp in barren fields and scorched woods, extinguished, blackened pipe dangling from his loosened teeth, slack, empty game bag slung on his arm, and a mute, useless shotgun broken over his shoulder. Spin beheld the fall from sovereignty of his master, and the gun, with abject, trembling horror.

But then an even more horrifying thought invaded the mind of Spin! What if that apocalyptic voice… What if the savage, destructive roar was the new voice of the same gun? What if the formerly familiar gun had become suddenly possessed by a demon of sudden insanity, and begun running berserk through the city, the streets, the fields, the forests, woods, the riverbanks, overthrowing all known nature with its new, horrendous, possessed, insane, delusional voice? What if it also possessed Mameli? At this thought Spin felt his blood freeze.

He now imagined this new, transformed Mameli grasping with insane compulsion that new, terrible, rampant God of the Gun! Impassioned by demonic insanity it rose threateningly before Spin's eyes! Now, the new and strange Mameli slipped a cartridge into the chamber! The new hybrid creature, Man and Gun, like a centaur but altogether new and terrible, a new eruption from a crazed world, the Man and Gun raised the weapon! He placed the finely-crafted butt to his shoulder and pulled the trigger!

A horrible, shattering, blast burst forth from the muzzle of the Gun.

A tremendous detonation shook Spin's world to its core. Deep chasms opened wide in the earth; they then collapsed with an enormous, piercing

rumble, raising immense clouds of enveloping, choking, suffocating dust, and Spin's existence disintegrated.

In the cellar of the Italian Legation, everyone smoked cigarettes, and everyone was silent, pale and sweaty. Someone prayed quietly. Spin closed his dog's eyes, and commended his dog's soul to God.

Two

I was near Pančevo, at the approach to Belgrade, watching.

An immense cloud rose from the city and looked, from that distance, like the widely spread wings of a gigantic, jet-black bird. The wings throbbed, pulsated, with a whirling within like fluttering feathers, and covered the sky with their vastness. A deep red setting sun struck the cloud-wings sideways, loosing shafts of terrible light through their sooty, bloody bulk. It was like the flapping of a towering, struggling vulture, mortally wounded, which tries to rise but can't, penetrated by fiery arrows, unable to lift itself, instead thrashing, cutting, and tearing at the sky with its knifelike feathers.

From across the Danube, we overlooked the city nestled on its wooded hill, watched from the bottoms of a green plain crisscrossed by amber rivers, and saw languid flocks of raptor-like Stukas drop from within the giant, dying vulture and dive relentlessly with their own beaks and claws outstretched, horribly shrieking, tearing the white-painted houses with their bills and talons, tall buildings erupting from the inside. We watched the Stukas swoop over the roads that radiated from the edges of the suburbs into the surrounding plains, twinkling streams flowing from their predatory mouths like frothing saliva. In the flowing waters of the Danube and Sava tall, filthy fountains of mud erupted from the riverbanks.

Over our heads was a continuous rumble, the incessant hiss of metal wings, the scream of whistles, aerial steel sparkling in the last fires of the day. The horizon went dark as slate. Remote flashes of flame rose here, then there, across the plain.

Disorganized bands of Serbian soldiers roamed aimlessly around the countryside. German patrols could be seen curving along the ditches, rummaging through thickets of rushes and reeds, splashing in the muck-filled depressions along the river Tamiš. It was a pale and sickly-sweet evening. A swollen moon appeared over the low hills on the horizon, sparkling the roiling waters of the Danube.

From a room in a dilapidated cottage, I watched the moon rise slowly; the sky was a weird, rosy color, similar to the pink of an infant's fingernails. A plaintive chorus of dogs floated around me.

No human voice can approach that of the dog's in the expression of universal anguish and despair. No music, not even the most honest and

pure, can express the pain of the world, it's *weltschmerz*, as truly as that of the dog's.

They were modulated, tremulous notes, tensioned on a thread of long and wavering breath, which suddenly broke into a high, clear, sobbing end. They were lost causes, deserted calls: they reverberated in the swamps, the woods, the tangles of reeds and rushes, where the wind passed through with a murmuring shiver.

Dead bodies floated in stagnant ponds; murders of crows, the moon gilding the tips of their feathers and their shining black eyes, rose with a silent flutter of wings from the carrion of dead horses littered along the roads.

Ravenous packs of dogs raced through the villages, where some houses still smoked from dying embers. They went by at a fast run, in tight formation and heavy with canine suspicion, turning their heads here and there, jaws open, eyes glowing red. Every now and then they stopped, barked and quarreled amongst themselves, then howled plaintively in unison at the bloated moon.

Sallow, oily, drenched in sweat, the moon crawled slowly into the pure sky, parts of it still that color of a baby's fingernails, illuminating with a diaphanous light, sick, among the ruined and deserted villages, the streets and fields scattered with dead, and the White City at the bottom, covered by the dying black vulture's wings of smoke.

I stayed in Pančevo for three days. Then we went further and crossed the river Tamiš, crossed the peninsula that the Tamiš forms flowing into the Danube, and for another three days we stopped in the village of Rit, just opposite Belgrade on the bank of the great river, near the twisted girders of the destroyed bridge dedicated to the name of King Petar II.

In the lurid, rushing, impetuous flow of the Danube there were milling tangles of scorched beams, stained mattresses, dead horses, dead sheep, dead oxen, dead people. There, before us on the opposite bank, the city lay roasting in a greasy, fatty stench over the emerging smell of springtime. Clouds of smoke rose from the train station and the Dušanovac neighborhood. We waited until one day, close to sunset, one Captain Klingberg crossed the Danube in a rowboat with four German Army privates and occupied Belgrade.

Then, we also ferried the immense river, protected by the solemn hand-gestures of a Non-Commissioned Officer. A Feldwebel of the Grossdeutschland Division, he directed the entirety of all cross-river traffic. He was solitary and pure, essential and abstract. He perched on a shattered concrete block like a Pagan god atop a Doric Column: that one, single NCO erected on the bank of the Danube, sole referee and dictatorial

deity over an immense traffic of men, boats, and machines. We crossed the river and landed in Belgrade at the Train Station, near the bottom of Prince Paul Avenue.

A gentle breeze rustled the remaining green leaves of the trees. Sunset was near, and the last light of the day filtered like a slow rain from the gray and opaque sky, like falling ash.

Briefly exploring, I passed by stopped trams and taxis full of corpses. Large street cats crouched on discarded furniture cushions blown from the buildings, and stared at me with slanting, phosphorescent eyes, standing sentry over dead bodies already livid and bloated. A bedraggled yellow house cat followed me for a long way along the sidewalk, meowing piteously. I walked on a carpet of broken windows, the soles of my shoes crackling loudly on shards of glass. Every now and then I encountered a passerby who crept along the walls with a suspicious pace, looking around warily.

I tried to ask questions, but no-one answered. Every one of them stared at me with strange, wide eyes, the whites showing, then fled without even looking back. On their dirt-smeared faces showed not exactly fear, but more fixed expressions of profound shock and astonishment.

The Wehrmacht had declared martial law, and soon there was only half an hour until Army curfew. Terazije was deserted. On the edge of a bomb crater, in front of the Hotel Balkan, there was a crushed and perforated bus packed with dead bodies. At Spomenik Plaza the Royal Theater still burned. It was an evening like translucent glass; a weak light, like thin milk, bathed the wrecked houses, the empty streets, the abandoned vehicles, the trams stopped and wrecked in the middle of their routes.

The streetlights were off.

Here and there in the dead city the echo of military rifle shots rang out: dry, malignant. It was already dark when I finally arrived in front of the Italian Legation. The building at first seemed impressively intact: then little by little, through the gloom, a closer look revealed shattered windows, shutters torn off, plaster stucco peeling from the walls, and the roof lifted and dropped back down, visibly askew, by the force of an immense explosion.

I entered. The interior was dimly lit by small oil lamps arranged strategically here and there on the furniture, seeming similar to the candles placed before sacred images. Shadows flickered on the walls. Upstairs, I found Francesco Giorgio Mameli, Extraordinary Envoy and Plenipotentiary Minister of Italy in Belgrade, working in his study. He was bent over some wrinkled papers, his pale, thin face illuminated by a halo

of light from two candles. He looked up, stared at me fixedly, then placed his head in his hands, as if he couldn't believe his own eyes.

He finally said, "Where did *you* come from?"

Further he asked, "From Romania? Bucharest? From the Tamiš across the Danube? How did you do it?"

Mameli didn't wait for my answer, but burst forth in a passionate, outpouring flow of words and impressions, like a fresh witness describing a heinous crime, about the terror bombing, of the terrible massacre. It is something shameful, he told me, to be allies of these Germans. To attack military targets, to advance, to conquer, that is the honorable way to make war, but this, this! They, of the Italian Legation, spent days living in uncertainty and violence, waiting for the bombs to stop falling on a prostrated city, for German troops to advance and at least restore order, troops that didn't come, days spent sleepless behind improvised barricades, armed only with pocket pistols and Mameli's own fine hunting guns, prey to gangs of looters and the rampaging mob while Stukas screamed and Belgrade burned.

A thousand-kilo bomb fell just beyond the garden wall.

But thanks be to God's Grace, he said, we are all safe, no-one even injured, not one. I observed him while he spoke. He had dark circles around his eyes, and his gaunt face and red eyes betrayed an exhausting deficit of sleep. Mameli looked small, thin, and a little hunched over. For many years he had leaned on a cane, limping from an injury from The Great War, and even now without the cane he walked with a light shuffling of his feet.

(How long have I known Mameli? Oh, for twenty years, at least. He is a genuinely good, decent, moral man, and I respect him deeply. He continues, relieved to pour out his heart to a trusted friend sent to him by mysterious means. This new war outrages him, its prosecution is an insult to his honor, its conduct is an abomination, it is an affront to his Christian faith, it offends his finely honed martial spirit, it violates his every honest religious belief.)

Suddenly, he exhausted his supply of words. He ran a hand down over his thin, tired face. He said after a long period of silence:

"Come, my friend Malaparte, let's have dinner, like civilized men."

Around the table faces were pale, damp with sweat, unshaven. For terrible days and sleepless nights Mameli and the officials of the Legation had lived like legionnaires under siege in an isolated desert fort. Now that siege was ended, but there was no running water, no electricity, no gas.

The liveried waiters were impeccable, but with something exhausted and frightful in their sleep-deprived faces. The candlelight danced off crystal glasses, off silverware, on white linens. With no gas for cooking, in the besieged fort of the Legation lit by old oil lamps and flickering candles, we had more rations than a true meal: a simple bowl of lukewarm soup, a bit of cheese, an orange. After dinner, Mameli returned with me to his study, and we began talking over whisky. After the events of the day, and with the time to relax, something suddenly struck me as missing.

I looked around and asked, “Where’s Spin?”

Mameli looked at me sadly, with a hint of reticence in his eyes.

“He’s... sick,” he responded.

“Oh no, poor Spin! What’s wrong? Has he been injured? You said no-one was hurt!”

Mameli flushed a little and answered awkwardly without looking at me.

“No, no, he’s not injured, I don’t know what’s wrong exactly, he is... sick.”

“Well, I’m sure it’s some minor thing.”

“Yes, of course, it’s nothing,” Mameli hurried to respond. “It doesn’t have to be anything serious.”

“Would you like me to take a look at him?”

“It’s not important, thank you,” responded Mameli, face flushing again. “It’s better to leave him alone, tranquil.”

“But Spin and I are friends, he’ll be happy to see me again.”

“Yes, of course, he will be pleased to see you again.” He brought his glass of whisky to his lips. “But, maybe at this time, it’s better to leave him in peace.”

“It will do him good to see an old friend!” So saying I stood up. “Where is he? Let’s go say good night to him.”

“Oh, you know how Spin is,” Mameli said without getting out of his chair. “He doesn’t like being bothered when he’s sick. He doesn’t want a commotion, no doctors or nurses. He wants to heal by himself.”

Mameli poured from the bottle of Johnny Walker and asked me, smiling, “A little more whisky?”

I chided my friend Mameli.

“Spin isn’t sick,” I said, “He’s just angry with you, sulking, for not taking him hunting anymore. You’ve been lazy for some time, admit it. You want to be comfortable and never leave the house. It’s a bad sign, Mameli, a sign of declining age. Is it not true you’ve become soft?”

“That’s not true!” exclaimed Mameli. “It is not true. I take him hunting at least once a week. We take some wonderful walks. Just recently,

we were also in Fruška Gora, we stayed there for three days, just a month ago, before my wife returned to Sardinia. He is not angry with me, Spin isn't. He's not, I tell you that he's sick."

"Then let's go and see him," I said, heading for the battered doorway. "Where is he? Where's our friend Spin?"

"He's in the cellar," Mameli muttered, head down with lowered eyes.

"In the cellar?"

"Yes, in the cellar, the bomb shelter, I mean."

"The bomb shelter? The cellar?" I said, looking fixedly at Mameli.

"I have tried everything, he doesn't want to come up," Mameli responded, keeping his eyes down, fixed on the table. "It's almost ten days since he went down into the shelter."

He drained his whisky.

"Ten days? He doesn't want to come up?" I declared, "Then we'll go downstairs to him. Come."

And so we went down the stairs, holding an old oil lamp. In the darkest corner, the most secret part of the cellar, on a makeshift bed of cushions from a ruined couch, huddled our friend Spin. I first saw the bright, frightened flash of his eyes, then I heard the soft thudding of his tail on the cushions.

I said in a low voice to Mameli, paused on the last step: "What the hell's wrong with him?"

"He's... sick," Mameli said.

"Okay, but what the hell's wrong with him?"

"He's sick with fear," Mameli said in a low voice, and even in the dim light of the oil lamp I could see his face flush.

Spin really did look like a frightened dog, terrorized by an overwhelming fear; and a feeling of shame was added to the fear: as soon as he saw me, and recognized me from my smell and voice, he lowered his ears and hid his muzzle between his paws. He looked sideways, not meeting my eyes, yet wagged his tail slowly, just like a dog does when he is ashamed of himself.

He had lost weight, his ribs showed in his hollow sides, and his eyes were watery.

I couldn't stop myself from exclaiming, "Oh, Spin!"

I said it with an accent of pity and reproach. Spin stared at me with imploring eyes, then fixed Mameli with a distrustful, disappointed look, and then I understood: there was a whole tangle of emotions and sentiments in him, fear, disappointment, regret, and also a little pity, yes, a little bit of commiserating pity. Spin's dog mind was tormented.

"It's not just fear," I said. "There is something else, more."

“Something else?” Mameli said, eagerly, hopefully.

“It’s not just fear,” I said. “There’s something darker, deeper in him. I suspect so, and I truly hope that it’s not just fear. Fear of that kind is a shameful thing.”

I said emphatically to my friend Malaparte, “No, it’s not just fear.”

Spin listened to me with now-alert ears.

“Malaparte, you take a great weight off of my heart,” said Mameli. “There have never been any cowards in my house, not one, ever. This would be the first case of cowardice in my family. We have always been brave, we Mamelis. And it would be a great pain to me, it would break my heart, if Spin were unworthy of the name he bears, the name of Mameli.”

“Oh, I’m absolutely positive Spin is worthy of the traditions of your family. Is that not true, Spin?”

I said to Spin, in his native English, “*You are a brave dog, aren’t you?*”

I told him this in his mother tongue, stroking his forehead. Spin looked at me, tail wagging. Then I turned to look at Mameli, with my friend’s eyes full of disappointment, of pity, of regret, full of hopeful, affectionate reproach.

“Good night, Spin,” I said.

Mameli and I went back up into the study, and sat in armchairs in front of the unlit fireplace, warmed instead by whisky. We stayed like that for a long time, without speaking, just drinking and smoking, like civilized men. Mameli occasionally sighed, acted as though to speak, then not, looking at me.

“Tomorrow morning,” I assured him, “You will see that Spin will be healed. I have a wonderful medicine. I know just what to do.”

I got up, and Mameli walked me to my bed.

He said, “Good night, my friend,” with a sad voice.

I heard him go away with that light, shuffling step of his, a little unsure, and it seemed to me he limped more than usually.

Three

My bed was a sofa in a parlor adjacent to the dining room. I took off my boots and threw myself on the dust-covered cushions but I couldn't immediately sleep. Through a large glass door, shockingly intact, that separated the living room from the dining room, I saw crystal glasses and bottles glistening in the shadows; porcelain, trays of silverware.

The sofa was in a corner, under a large painting depicting the biblical episode of Potiphar's wife. The cloak of Joseph was a beautiful garb of deep red wool; it looked soft and warm. I only had my damp, muddy raincoat to cover myself. In the gestures of the lascivious wife of Potiphar, I deluded myself that I recognized a maternal gesture of pity and solicitude, as if that sinner was driven not by an impure desire, but from good, true, and honest intentions, to take the cloak off of Joseph and let it fall on me.

The pacing of German patrols resounded in the dark, deserted streets. Around one in the morning someone pounded on the door of the nearby Bulgarian Legation.

"Quiet, don't make noise," I said, fading in and out of restless sleep. "Don't wake up our poor friend Spin. Spin is ill, he's sleeping. I'll tell you in your mother tongue: '*You're a brave dog, aren't you, Spin?*'"

A sudden fatigue overcame me and I fell headlong into a deep sleep.

Early the next morning I said to Mameli, "Get a gun from the rack, and a couple of cartridges."

Mameli went out into the corridor, took a shotgun off the rack, and opened it to blow through the barrels, inspecting for obstructions and debris.

I announced, "Now! Let's go get our friend Spin!"

We went down the cellar stairs and stopped. As soon as Spin saw Mameli with the shotgun in his hands, he closed his eyes and hid his muzzle beneath his paws. He began to yelp softly, like the cries of an abandoned baby.

"Let's go, Spin!" I said.

Spin opened his eyes wide and stared at Mameli and the shotgun, trembling violently.

"Okay, Spin, let's go!" I repeated with an emphasis of affectionate reproach.

But Spin didn't move, only stared at the shotgun and Mameli with eyes opened wide, head bobbing with fear. I walked over amongst the dangling sausages and took him up in my arms. He was shaking like a terrified child, eyes clamped shut and face buried in my armpit so as not to see the shotgun Mameli held on his shoulder. We walked slowly up the stairs, and went out into the hall.

In the hall, waiting for us, we found Monsignor Ettore Felici, Nuncio of Serbia in Belgrade, and the Minister of the United States, Mr. Bliss Lane. They had received word of my unexpected arrival and, knowing I would be leaving that same day for Hungary, they had rushed to the Italian Legation to ask me to deliver some parcels to Budapest.

Lane had a large yellow manila envelope in his hands, which he begged me to deliver to the United States Legation. Then he pressed on me the text of a telegram, which I was supposed to send from the capital to his wife, safely in Florence at that time as the guest of a friend. Also, Monsignor Felici begged me to deliver one of his envelopes to the Nunziotarua in Budapest.

I said, "Yes, yes, but first we must think of our friend Spin, who is quite ill. We'll talk about your packages later."

"Oh, of course!" said Monsignor Felici. "Firstly you must care for Spin."

"Who the hell is Spin?" demanded Mr. Bliss Lane, Minister of the United States, turning his large envelope in his hands.

"Who is Spin? What? You don't know Spin?" said Monsignor Felici.

"Spin is ill, and we must take care of him," I said.

"You mean the dog? I hope you don't want to... kill him," said Mr. Bliss Lane, indicating the shotgun a very pale Mameli was nervously clutching in his fists.

I said, "One cartridge will suffice, I think."

"But, but that's *horrible*," said Mr. Bliss Lane in an indignant voice.

Meanwhile I had turned my back and gone out into the garden. I deposited Spin on the gravel of the walkway, securing him by his leash. Spin at first tried to escape, writhing frantically and struggling to get away, whimpering softly, like the soft wail of a baby. But when he saw Mameli break open the shotgun and slowly remove a cartridge from his pocket, then insert it into the barrel, Spin stopped fighting, huddled shivering on the ground, and closed his eyes.

Monsignor Felici took a few steps back into the garden, stopped, turned around, and bent his head down, pressing his chin to his chest, praying to God for the soul of Spin.

"Are we ready?" asked Mameli.

By this time the entire staff of the Legation was gathered in the garden. They all stepped back: Guidotti, Princip Ruffo, Count Fabrizio Franco, Bavai, Costa, Corrado Sofia. All were silent, staring at the shotgun the now sheet-white Mameli held in his shaking hands. He closed the action and readied himself.

"It's horrible, what are you doing?" demanded Mr. Bliss Lane with a choking voice. "It's a horrible thing!"

I ordered Mameli: "Shoot! Now!"

Mameli adjusted his grip on the shotgun. Everyone held their breath. Spin, crouched on the ground, was crying softly. Mameli slowly raised the shotgun to his shoulder, took aim, and fired. The report of the gun shouted out short, pure, clear between the walls of the garden.

Mameli had aimed the weapon up into a tree: a flock of sparrows flew away with a collective complaint, and some leaves fell off the branches, wandering limply down in the grey morning air. Spin raised his head, cocked his ears, opened his eyes, and looked around.

It was the familiar voice.

It was the friendly voice of the gun: the gun had returned.

Therefore, everything had reverted to its natural, ancient order, reconstituted in glorious harmony. Nature, no longer crazed and shocked by the enormous shout, horrendous, delirious, of the gigantic, maddened Gun, had returned to smile upon the dog Spin in serenity.

When Mameli had slipped the cartridge into a chamber, Spin had felt his blood run cold in his veins, waiting for the muzzle of that dreadful Gun to break loose in that noise of awful thunder, that deranged roar that overthrew Nature, collapsed Spin's world, and filled the Earth with ruins, mourning, madness, and lamentations.

Spin had closed his eyes, trembling in anguished expectation; but here was the shotgun, finally healed of the monstrous, mystical insanity. He had returned to make his ancient, true voice heard, that familiar voice in a healed existence.

Spin jumped up, wagging his tail frantically, reborn, resurrected even. He looked around in astonishment and still a little incredulous, then energetically shook himself, and, when released from the leash, ran around the garden with loud shouts of happiness, until he came to rest with his two front paws on the chest of his beloved, returned Mameli, barking joyfully at the gun.

Mameli was still a little pale and shaky.

"Come on, Spin," he said.

And circled by the joyous dog Spin, we went inside and put the shotgun back on the rack.

Curzio Malaparte

Introduction To The Second Story

In translating Curzio Malaparte's stories sometimes one ends up asking the question, "What, exactly, is this story even about?"

He is a master of the The Shaggy Dog story, or the story of Captain Kopeikin, and the story originally titled *Golf Handicaps* is something of a masterpiece of this kind of thing. In its original form it contains something like 9 languages, mixed in with no explanation or translation: much of the dialogue in the original Italian is actually in untranslated French. There are at least 12 time frames in barely 20-some pages, mixed together seemingly randomly.

Even the Italian contains clever jokes and word games. It's as close to 'untranslatable' as anything can really get. However, like all Malaparte's WWII material, while the author has to be described as the sort of writer who 'never allows facts to get in the way of a good story', it can't be taken to mean the essentials of what he's writing aren't based in fact.

In this case, I fell into the Sunk Cost Fallacy; because I thought it would be easy, I started it; when realizing it wasn't easy at all, it led to stubbornness in not wanting to admit defeat; and finally led to insisting the story contained some kind of at least interesting information that would justify the effort. And, the entire effort was based on a misconception: the vintage, English paperback version of *Kaputt* I purchased thinking I would get the English version of *Mad Guns* not only didn't have that story (it hasn't been translated into English until now), it didn't have *Golf Handicaps*, and I assumed it also hadn't been translated into English.

In fact, it was, it simply wasn't included in the cheap paperback I bought.

So I bought the Italian, French, and German translations of *Kaputt*, and worked primarily from the original Italian; and it wasn't until I was almost finished that it was pointed out to me that the full English book did contain *Golf Handicaps*.

Whoops.

However, it was immediately clear the 'official' English translation and my own differed in some significant ways; and so instead of discarding the work as irrelevant I finished it, and then restructured and rearranged the story into less a translation, rather more a reinterpretation.

The use of the diplomatic French, *lingua franca*, in the original Italian makes the entire thing a vicious commentary on just how isolated from reality the subjects of the Golf Club actually are; how asinine and selfish; out-of-touch elites toying with peoples' lives while engaging in incessant, adulterous sexual affairs and impossibly petty intrigues. The characters of the story aren't Nazis or mass murderers or even bad people exactly; but their disassociation from the lives of others during a world cataclysm makes them repellent and repulsive.

They all deserved to die and be eaten by flies.

The final decision of what, exactly, the story is really about was this: it's about Galeazzo Ciano. In many ways it's an elegy to a crucially flawed friend, and when Malaparte meets with him it's clear he is visiting with a man he knows to be already dead; Ciano just doesn't know it yet. Or he does, and is putting it from his mind as he can't stand to think about it.

Ciano isn't a sympathetic character. He comes across as that archetype of a lower class guy who marries the boss's daughter and gets in way over his head. Unable to resist the cornucopia of temptations presented to him by his unearned and undeserved advancement, he simply and predictably screws everything up and pays the price. But Malaparte credits him with an intense personal loyalty, and makes it very clear he *owes* Ciano for his defense of him, in disregard of his own position. The sense of personal friendship is very real; Ciano isn't a good guy, but he's Curzio's friend.

A French film director, a maker of tough, violent crime thrillers, once said, "A true friend is a man whom one can telephone in the middle of the night and say, 'Come quickly, and bring your gun'; and know he will ask no questions and come."

The other subject is Isabelle Colonna, and she is a far more complicated character. It seems even Malaparte, so often so cynical and arch, convinced of his own opinions and judgments, fails in assessing her. He genuinely can't figure out what she's up to, or even who she is. He describes several of her behaviors, and her stated, surface opinions, her background and cultural history, but ultimately settles for just that, surrendering the field to Isabelle as simply too skilled, too Byzantine, too ruthless for him to attempt to explain.

Malaparte tries to set himself up as a guy who outsmarts people, but in Isabelle, he can't do it: she's too good, too complex, too powerful. Lucrezia Borgia would have been permanently green with envy at Isabelle Colonna's skills.

Of all the figures in the story, the one that *isn't fooling around* is Isabelle Colonna.

Or, as Malaparte speculates, mostly because he can't understand her, she was a silly, deluded woman playing pointless games she didn't understand. But that assessment doesn't shift the impression that regardless of her actual skill, she did truly believe in her cause, and despite the handicap of being a person with vague and undefined political directions, she never wavered in her true goal: which was religious, not political; not even once. Her total, iron-willed belief in her cause and in her own skills at attaining a result, while Malaparte tries to denigrate her personality and efforts as naive; those characteristics didn't affect the eventual outcome.

Ultimately, Malaparte throws up his hands, gives up, and declares her to be absolutely nothing more than, but absolutely nothing less than, the mysterious agent of Fate.

My final assessment of her is that she had the absolutely single-minded goal of preserving what she believed to be a Divine Order, and worked tirelessly to that one end. She played everyone against everyone else, created a *fog of war* inside drawing rooms and palaces, did deals with the Vatican; she lied, cheated, stole, betrayed, procured, pandered and pimped to succeed at this, and I believe she ultimately did. Isabelle Colonna molded herself into The First Lady Of Rome for, I believe, the sole purpose of fulfilling what she believed to be her chosen destiny, her job: the preservation of a religious, Divine structure. It's hard to discern any real selfishness in her behavior; there is little evidence she was motivated by a true desire for power for its own sake.

In doing this, she elevated Galeazzo Ciano, and allied with him; and the reasons for doing so, Malaparte takes a stab at explaining. And, Isabelle Colonna's machinations in pursuit of her goal finally, in the end, cost Ciano, Curzio's flawed but valued friend, his soul and then his life.

There is, as well, contained in this story a stunning allegation.

Isabelle Colonna never had any use for Fascism, considering it a Leftist Revolution; but more manageable than a Communist variant; and so spared no effort to contain and then subvert it. In doing this, she more-or-less secretly allied with Britain, and that's because of the British Monarchy and its preservation of her view of the Divine Order. She kept various factions and people endlessly occupied with petty infighting and distractions, which may seem impossible to someone outside that circle of selfish idiocy.

"Important people aren't that petty and easily influenced!"

Well, yes, they are exactly just that.

What Malaparte makes clear is just how important Isabelle made herself, and how, through social approval and its converse, humiliation, she managed and manipulated virtually the entirety of the Fascist Regime's apparatus in Rome.

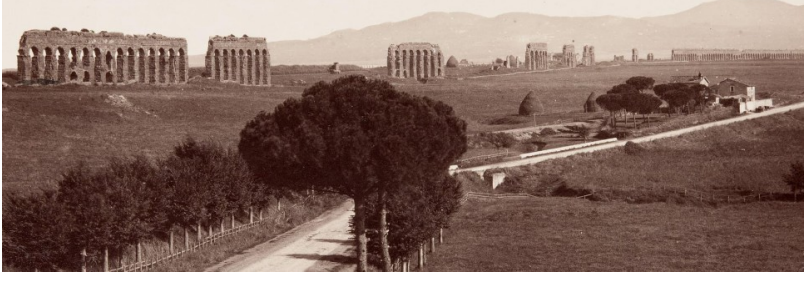
To this end, when Mussolini took off for Egypt with his blinged-out Sword Of Islam, he left behind Isabelle Colonna; and in those circumstances, she, and she through her pawn Ciano, sabotaged the Axis supply train to the Desert Campaign. Rommel insisted ever after to anyone that would listen that there was no problem with the Italian forces, they weren't cowardly or weak; they just couldn't get enough supplies to support themselves, and for that he placed the blame solely on incompetence and infighting in the Italian Armed Forces supply structure.

That trail leads directly back to Isabelle Colonna.

Contained, buried, within this story, which takes us, the disbelieving reader, into the exclusive clubs and salons of the Italian Elite, is the allegation that, nearly single-handedly, Isabelle Colonna removed Italy from the War and caused the defeat of Rommel's Afrika Korps.

As I say, that is a stunning allegation. If it's even only half-true, she was still a major player in the Second World War, who goes unmentioned as so much of what she did was and is hidden; and she preferred it that way. I can't say I like Isabelle Colonna, but her masterful skills and brutal focus have to be respected; to fail to respect someone like that, is to doom oneself.

She's a scary individual.



Golf Club dell’Acquasanta

Edda Mussolini and Galeazzo Ciano

Galeazzo Ciano

Isabelle *Sursuq*

Isabelle Colonna and Galeazzo Ciano

The ‘Sword Of Islam’

Wermacht General Eugen von Schobert

COUNTRY CLUB

One

It was in Ukraine, 1941, in the first months of the Russian campaign. Wermacht General Eugen Siegfried Erich Ritter von Schobert had invited me to dinner at the 11th Army Command, and there were about ten officers around the table. At a certain point von Schobert inquired of me what I thought of the situation of the German army in Russia.

"I think," I said, alluding to an Italian proverb, "that the German army in Russia is not like a chick in the *stoppa*, but more like a chick in the steppe."

I assumed he understood. General von Schobert had been to Italy, and knew some Italian. But when the interpreter, Lieutenant Schiller, a Tyrolean from Merano who had opted for German ethnicity and nationality, translated my answer, trying to explain the meaning of that Italian proverb, General von Schobert asked me in a reproachful voice, at the same time severe and astonished, why, in Italy, the chicks were raised in *stoppa*, tangled flax fibers: tow.

"But we don't raise them, lost and helpless, in tow," I said. "It's just a popular saying to show the difficulties in which a poor chick can become entangled, and struggles and struggles, who happens to be scratching around in a pile of tow."

"With us, in Bavaria," von Schobert said, "the chicks are raised in sawdust, or in chopped straw."

"But also in Italy, they are raised in sawdust or in chopped straw," I said.

"So, why did you speak of tow?" demanded von Schobert, frowning.

"But it's just a popular proverb," I said, "a simple saying, a turn of phrase, a metaphor."

"Uuhmm... weird," said General von Schobert. "But why the talk of *stoppa* and the Steppe?"

"With us in East Prussia," said one of the officers, Colonel Stark, "the chicks are raised in sand: it is an economical and rational system."

"But also with us in Italy," I said. "In certain regions where the soil is sandy, chicks are raised in the sand!"

I was starting to sweat, and I begged the interpreter to help me in a low voice, for God's sake, to get this subject behind me, out of my way, to fix this.

Schiller smirked, and looked at me sideways, with an air of telling me: “What a beautiful mess you've gotten yourself into, and now you think it’s my job to get you out of it!”[1]

"If that is so," said von Schobert, "about the sand, then I don't understand what tow has to do with it. It is true that it is a proverb, but this proverb, and all popular idioms, always must have some relationship with reality. This means that, despite your statement to the contrary, there are regions in Italy where chicks are raised in tow: which is an irrational, inefficient and cruel system."

He stared at me with a stern look, in which a flash of suspicion and contempt began to emerge.

I wanted to answer him, "Yes sir, General, I dared not say it, but the truth is that in regions of Italy chicks are raised in tow, and not only in this or that region, but in all regions: Piedmont, Lombard, Tuscany, Umbria, Calabria, Sicily, everywhere in all of Italy: and not only the chicks are raised in the tow, but also the children, all Italians are raised in tow! You, in all your travels in Italy, you never noticed that every Italian is raised in tow?"

Maybe he would understand me, maybe he would believe me, and he himself would never have known how much truth there was in my words. But I was sweating, and I repeated to him that no, that it was not true, that in no region of Italy chicks are raised in tow, that it was only a proverb, a popular saying, *ein Volkssprichwort*.

At this point one Major Hanberger, who for some time had been looking straight at me with a glazed look in his gray eyes, said in a cold voice, "Then explain to me what it has to do with the steppe and our soldiers. Okay for tow, you have made the question of tow perfectly clear. But the steppe? What does the steppe have to do with it? *Was hat die Steppe mit den Küken zu tun*?"

I turned to Schiller to ask him for help, to plead with my eyes to escape, for the love of God, from this new and far more serious danger, but I realized with horror that Schiller too was beginning to perspire; he had sweat on his forehead, his face had turned white. Then I got truly scared. I

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1. In the WWII, Nazi-led Wermacht, there was a criminal offense entitled *Zersetzung der Wehrkraft,* roughly ‘Undermining the War Effort’.

This could be pretty much anything, said by anyone, perceived or interpreted as being defeatist in meaning or tone: doubting the abilities of German soldiers, the possibility of success of any action, and/or questioning the final, triumphant victory of Nazi Germany. It correlated with sedition or treason, and in any situation of martial law, was punishable with a more or less immediate death penalty.

Making any comment, however casual, about the potential failure or even temporary stasis of the German Army or its soldiers was a deadly serious thing.

looked around, and saw that all the officers were quiet and staring at me with severity. I was lost, and I began to repeat once, twice, three times, that it was just a proverb, a popular folk saying, nothing more than a simple play on words.

"This is fine," said Major Hanberger, "But I still don't understand what the steppe has to do with chickens."

Then I began to get irritated, overcoming my fear, and I replied in an impatient voice that the German army in Russia was just like a chick in the steppe, no more, no less than like a chick in the steppe. That was all.

"Okay," said Hanberger, "but I don't understand what may be so unusual about steppe chicks. In all the villages of Ukraine there are many hens, and therefore also many chicks, and I don't think they have anything strange about them. They are chicks like any others."

"No," I said, "they are not chicks like all others."

"They are not chicks like the others?" demanded Hanberger, staring into my face with a look of amazement.

"In Germany," said von Schobert, "poultry raising has reached a scientific level infinitely higher than that of the Soviet Union. It is highly probable, therefore, that the Ukrainian steppe chicks are of a genetic quality far inferior to that of our German chicks."

Colonel Stark then began sketching on a piece of note paper a model chicken coop devised in East Prussia; Major Hanberger cited numerous statistics, and so, little by little, the conversation turned into a learned lesson of scientific poultry raising, in which all the other officers took animated part.

I kept silent, wiping off the sweat that dripped from my forehead, and every little while, von Schobert, Stark, and Hanberger paused in their discussion to stare at me, saying they still didn't understand what there was in common between German soldiers and chicks, and the other officers looked at me with deep pity for my obvious simple-mindedness: until finally they tired of the talk.

General von Schobert stood up and said, "*Schluss*!"

So we all got up from the table, and we went out, scattering in the streets of the village to go to bed. The moon rose round and yellow in the greenish sky.

Schiller said to me, bidding me good night, "I hope you have learned not to try to be funny with the Germans."

I said, "*Ach, so*!", and I went off to bed dejected and exhausted.

But then I couldn't sleep. Millions of crickets chirped in the clear night, and I thought I heard thousands of chicks cheeping, lost, in the infinite steppe. I finally fell asleep as the roosters were crowing.

Two

After a long time, a year of conflict and transgression on the Russian Front, in Ukraine, Poland, Finland, I was sitting off in a corner on the opened terrace of the Golf Club dell'Acquasanta in Rome.

A strange sense of discomfort and uneasiness overwhelmed me, watching the players move slowly and uncertainly on the far edge of the rising heights, that gently degrade before the red arches of the aqueducts, against the background of pines and cypress that top the tombs of the Orazi and the Curiazi.

It was a November morning in 1942. The sun was warm, and a damp wind was blowing from the sea, carrying a rich smell of seaweed and herbs. An invisible airplane was buzzing in the blue, the hum drifting from the sky like pollen.

I had returned to Italy only a few days before, after a long stay in a Helsinki clinic, where I had undergone a serious operation that left me exhausted. I tottered, leaning on a cane, my appearance pale and disheveled. The golfers began to return in small groups to the club: the beauties of the Palazzo Colonna, the dandies from the Excelsior Bar, the teams of ironic and cold secretaries of the Palazzo Chigi. They passed by and smiled greetings, some surprised to see me; they didn't know I had returned to Rome, believing me to still be in Finland.

Some lingered for a moment or two, seeing me so white and unkempt, to ask how I was, if it was cold in Scandinavia, if I was staying in Rome or planned to return to Finland. My martini glass shook in my hand. I was still very weak. I responded yes, no, yes, no, looking at their faces and laughing inside.

Then my friend Paola came and we found a secluded spot near a window.

She asked, "Nothing has changed, has it?"

I said, "Oh, everything has changed, it's amazing how much everything has changed."

"Strange," she said, "I hadn't noticed."

Paola was looking at the door, and suddenly exclaimed, "Here comes Galeazzo! Do you think he has changed as well?"

Three

Gian Galeazzo Ciano, 2nd Count of Cortellazzo and Buccari; son-in-law of Benito Mussolini, married to Edda, Mussolini's daughter.

I'd known Galeazzo since he was a boy, and he always defended me against everyone, without even my asking. He defended me in 1933 when they sentenced me to five years, defended me when they arrested me again in 1938, 1939, 1941. He defended me against Starace, Muti, Bocchini, Senise, Farinacci. I had for him a deep, affectionate gratitude, to his friendship, his disposition beyond any political consideration: he took pity on me, helped me; I wished I could help him one day.

Who would know that I couldn't, in my turn, help him one day?

But there was nothing more to be done now. All that remained was to bury him, with some honor. I was sure that, at least, they would bury him. With the many friends he had, it was to be hoped that, if nothing else, he would be buried by them, and by me.

Years ago, one morning Galeazzo called me to his house. It was an unusual hour, about eight o'clock in the morning. I found him in the bath. He got out of the tub, and while drying off, he spoke.

"Von Ribbentrop stabbed me in the back. Behind Himmler is Von Ribbentrop. it seems that in the latest Gestapo memorandum my head is separating from my body. Yes, Mussolini gives my head to Von Ribbentrop, he proves to be what we all know he is: a coward."

Then he pressed his palms on his naked belly.

He said, "This needs to lose some weight."

When he was dry, he threw away the bathrobe and stood naked in front of the mirror. He began to anoint his head with a mixture of Chinese herbs he had delivered from Shanghai, a kind of treatment used there for richness of hair; and also a baldness preventative.

He said, "Thank the saints that I am not the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China. You know China as I know it, and it's a delightful country, but think of what would happen to me there if I fell into disgrace."

Galeazzo then described to me a Chinese torture and execution, which he had witnessed on a street in Peking. The convict, tied to a pole, had removed with a small knife, piece by piece, all the flesh, except the nerves and the system of veins and arteries. The man thus becomes a kind of trellis of bones, nerves and veins, through which the rays of the sun pass

and the flies buzz. The victim can live like this for a few days. Galeazzo lingered with sado-masochistic delight on the most horrible details, and he laughed merrily.

I felt his sensual pleasure in cruelty, but at the same time his fear and his impotent hatred.

He said, "In Italy, things are not going well. Mussolini invented a much more cruel torture than the Chinese: the kick in the ass."

He tapped his buttocks.

"It’s not the kick itself that hurts, it’s the anticipation. And this wait continues, the exasperating uncertainty of every day, every hour, every minute."

I joked, I told him that he and I had been careful, that luckily we had fat asses. I saw him go dark in the face, and feel himself again.

"It really looks like I have a fat ass?"

Galeazzo was really very worried about getting fat in the ass. He started getting dressed.

"Mussolini will never give my head to anyone. He is afraid. It's clear that all Italians are with me. The people know that I’m the only one who has the courage to face him."

He was deluded, but it was not for me to disillusion him, and I kept silent.

He was, even then, sincerely convinced he was standing up to Mussolini. In fact, Galeazzo trembled from morning to night in terror of that kick in the ass. In front of Mussolini, Galeazzo was like all of us: a frightened servant. He always told him ‘Yes Sir, No Sir’; but he had the courage of a lion behind Mussolini’s back, unafraid of anything. If Mussolini had a mouth with no eyes or ears on his back, Galeazzo wouldn't hesitate to show off, to put his head between the jaws, as do circus tamers with their fierce beasts.

Those past years had been the golden age of the Golf Club dell’Acquasanta, the prestigious and happy days.

Then the War came.

The star of Galeazzo, lifted up the red-colored clouds of war, had rapidly risen on the horizon, and a new golden age, prestigious and happy days, seemed to have returned to the Club. The course become a kind of *paseo*, a promenade, where the young women of Rome paraded under the eyes of Galeazzo and his court, swinging their drivers in their little white-gloved hands. However, the names, the manners, the looks, the clothes, perhaps had something too new, and too vivid colors; a gaudiness, a superficiality, so as not to arouse the suspicion, sometimes unfair, that

usually arises around new men and new things in a world that is too old. In these old worlds authenticity is never awarded to newness or youth.

The too rapid fortunes of Galeazzo and his court were a clear sign of illegitimacy, about which it was not possible to be mistaken; but yet many were.

The British left.

The French left.

Many other foreign diplomats prepared to leave Rome: the German diplomats took the place of the British and the French; but a noticeable decay occurred in fashion, and a certain distrust, an indefinable uneasiness supplanted the ancient free grace, the old happy abandonment.

The Princess Anne Marie von Bismark, with her pale Swedish face, that seemed embroidered in the sky of blue silk against the background of pines, cypresses and tombs of the Via Appia, and the other young women of the German Embassy, had a shy and smiling grace. To that was added the demeanor of being foreigners in Rome, and added a modesty, in contrast to most every other foreign woman, who on arrival feels herself Roman: but a sorrow was in the air, a subtle and sweet regret.

The youthful court of Galeazzo was rather easy and generous: it was the court of a vain and capricious prince, in which one entered only by the favor of women, and exited by the sudden disfavor of the prince: a market of smiles, honors, jobs, and ecclesiastical privileges.

The Queen of that court was, of course, a woman: not, however, some favorite of Galeazzo, young and beautiful, but a woman for whom he was her favorite, her young colt. This Queen, which Roman society had accepted for some time, but not without tenacious resistance at the beginning; had a sort of courtly dominance, which came from her name, rank, wealth, and spiritual disposition of mind to intrigue. To this was added a natural characteristic of restlessness in her, accentuating her already indeterminate and uncertain, vacillating sense of political direction.

She was aided by her position, now no longer publicly disputed, of ‘The First Lady of Rome’; she was aided by the bewilderment into which Roman society had fallen due to the disorder of war and the uncertainty of tomorrow. She was aided by that sort of Pagan fatalism that creeps into the tired veins of old-women Catholic aristocracies at the approach of some terrible storm. She was aided by the corruption of moral principles and customs, always the herald of profound revolutions.

This Queen was Principessa Isabelle Colonna and she succeeded in making, in a short time, her home, the Piazza Santi Apostoli, Palazzo Colonna, the beacon, the citadel, of the new principles of Fascist

illegitimacy; which in the political and worldly field were, with a fresh and vibrant splendor, represented by Galeazzo and his court.

Which had been a surprise only to those who, unaware of the political events in the great Roman families in the last thirty or fifty years, or excluded from ‘public secrets’, had ignored Isabelle's true personal position in Rome.

The fact that Isabelle had fulfilled for many years the task of rigid vestal of the most rigorous principles of legitimacy, did not change the fact that ‘That Little Sursock’, as she was called in the early days of her marriage, her of the fabulously wealthy Sursocks, or as they were originally known *Sursuq*, Greek Christians, of Beirut, Lebanon, when she had just arrived in Rome from Cairo via Constantinople, along with her sister Matilda, who herself had married Alberto Theodoli; was still privately considered by some a parvenu, an intruder, and that in the Doric order of the Colonna house she represented the Corinthian column.

Then, presented with the illegitimate Italy that Mussolini and his Revolution installed, Isabelle for a few years, until the Vatican Concordat, donned an honest face and a smiling reserve, and placed herself, as it were, ‘seated at the house window like a pensioner’.

Isabelle regulated her relations with the Revolution, as it presented itself to her from the windows of the Palazzo Colonna, with the same formal meticulousness, the same rigorous attention to legal minutiae, that she used in drawing up her infamous leases with one unfortunate Mrs. Kennedy, who had long resided in a suite of rooms in the Palazzo Colonna.

On the day Isabelle opened her doors to the Fascist hero Italo Balbo, the legitimate scions of Rome didn’t express any true surprise, nor can it be said that the new development caused a scandal. But no one, perhaps, understood the true and profound reasons for the shifting attitude of Isabelle, and the presence of Balbo in the salons of the Piazza Santi Apostoli, the Palazzo Colonna.

The war became, not only for Isabelle and for Roman society, but for all the Italian people, what the Spaniards, with a term borrowed from bullfighting, call *el momente de verdad,* the instant in which the toreador faces the bull alone with sword in hand: at that moment the truth about man and beast is revealed.

All human and bestial vanities are shed: the man in that penultimate instant is alone and naked, before the beast also alone and naked. At the beginning of the war, in that moment of truth, even Isabelle was found alone and naked. She then declared her definitive choice between the

principles of legitimacy and those of illegitimacy, and publicly threw open the great gates of Palazzo Colonna and its court.

She thereby made the Palazzo Colonna like the palace of the Archbishop of Paris at the time of Cardinal de Retz: in a sense becoming Cardinal de Retz herself. Inside that palace where everything that was equivocal was now gathered, the inauthentic that had risen in recent years in the New Rome and the New Italy, Isabelle reigned as Queen; without ever renouncing an ancient spirit and dark disposition of mind to tyranny: and so Galeazzo played in it more as an instrument of tyranny, than he himself being the tyrant.

There were no more white roses and red winter strawberries, the fine royal fruits that until the war arrived every day on flights from Libya, the gifts of Italo Balbo, to adorn the table of Isabelle. Balbo was dead, and so too the winter roses and strawberries of Libya. But in their place were the white smiling teeth, the pink cheeks, the strawberry lips of the young women Isabelle offered as a new kind of royal fruit to the insatiable vanity of my friend Galeazzo.

During the brief, princely reign of Italo Balbo, the table of Isabelle had been compared, by the usual *beaux esprits* of Rome, of which Stendhal still speaks, to a launching pad: the platform, the airstrip, for the highest and riskiest earthly and political flights. From that table Balbo departed for his famous cruise across the Atlantic; from that table he stood up to depart on his infamous final flight.

Then the table of Isabelle, over which Galeazzo now stood, became a kind of Altar of the Fatherland; and under that table there was the corpse of a stranger. Who knew, maybe there someday would be another, unknown dead man in his turn.

No young woman that Galeazzo admired in some fleeting encounter, no foreigner of quality, no ambitious gallant; no fashionable dandy of the Palazzo Chigi craving a promotion of his choice or a favor in some desired embassy could escape obligation: a tribute which each urged with every fine and dark art: to present Isabelle and Galeazzo the symbolic sacrifice of a convivial bouquet of roses.

The newly accepted elects then were allowed to step across the threshold of the Palazzo Colonna, always with a demeanor of somewhat furtive mystery, but also brazenly, with the air of belonging to an unspoken but universally known conspiracy.

An invitation from Isabelle no longer had any real social worth. It had, perhaps, political value; but also about the political value of an invitation to the Palazzo Colonna many were wrong. Before she opened her doors, and perhaps alone among them all, Isabelle understood, she

knew, that the Count Galeazzo Ciano, the young, brash and gallant Foreign Minister, Mussolini's lucky son-in-law, didn't count for anything in Italian politics or life.

Then, why did Isabelle raise the flag of Galeazzo over the Palazzo Colonna?

There were those who naively reproached her for chaperoning Galeazzo out of personal ambition; can one imagine a more ridiculous accusation? How can a woman already Queen of Rome have any need of social climbing? Some thought it was produced from a passion for defensive intrigue, but all these seemed to forget that the *Prima Signora Di Roma* certainly had no conceivable need to improve her social position, much less to even have to defend it. From an alliance with Galeazzo she had everything to lose, and nothing to gain.

However, we all know the fate of alliances concluded by Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano: he always came out the lesser.

Justice must be done to the worldly craft of Isabelle, the unmatched genius of her social policies: no one, not even Mussolini, could even begin to challenge Isabelle in Rome.

So then, “Why?”

When it comes to conquering power, Isabelle had nothing to learn from anyone: she made her own March on Rome, and starting from much further back: almost twenty years before Mussolini. It must be acknowledged that she was far more successful. The reasons for the seeming infatuation of Isabelle for Galeazzo are then much more complex.

In a society in decline, close to its final ruin, in a nation where the principle of historical legitimacy, political and social, no longer enjoyed any authority; in an Italy where the classes closely linked to the fate of social conservation lost all prestige; Isabelle made her choice with the infallible instinct of a true Sursock of the Ottoman Empire. Italy was now to become the largest Levantine country in the West. From the perspective of political custom, Rome, much more than Naples, deserved the definition of Lord Rosebery:

“The only Eastern city in the world that has no European quarter.”

In such a degraded and fractured Italy, only the triumph of the powers of illegitimacy could guarantee a peaceful overcoming of the terrible social crisis that the war heralded; and used to realize the supreme aspiration of the conservative classes in periods of severe social crisis:

“Save what can be saved.”

Some taxed Isabelle with the naive reproach of having abandoned the cause of legitimacy for that of the illegitimate. In the language of the *smart set*, that meant to prefer Galeazzo Ciano over the Principe di

Piemonte, Umberto di Savoia who, in the eyes of the conservative classes, utterly personified the principle of legitimacy. The latter was, to them, the exemplar of order and social conservation, and appeared to be the only man capable of guaranteeing the peaceful overcoming of the Constitutional crisis.

True, if there was any royal in Europe rich in virtue, it was Principe Umberto.

His grace and goodness, and his smiling simplicity were the virtues that the Italian people looked for in their rulers; but he lacked certain things, qualities indispensable for taking on the task the conservative classes imposed on him. In terms of intelligence, Umberto had just enough to lead his peers to believe it was sufficient. In terms of a sense of personal honor, it would be to insult him to say that he had none. He had honor: yet not what conservatives, in moments of danger, mean by a sense of honor in a Prince.

In the language of frightened conservatives, the expression ‘sense of honor’ in a Prince, means that particular kind of honor which is concerned with saving not only the principle of Monarchy, not only constitutional institutions, not only dynasties, but all and everything behind them, those structures, those interests, that is, the ideas of proper social order.

Around Umberto, then, there was no reliance on his understanding what the expression ‘sense of honor’ means for conservatives in times of serious and dangerous social crises.

As for Umberto’s wife, the Principessa di Piemonte, in which many placed great hopes, she was not a woman with whom Isabelle could ally. In moments of serious social crisis, when everything is at stake and in danger, and not just the royal family and its dynastic interests, the Principessa Isabelle Colonna, the triumphant Little Sursock, could not deal with the Principessa except as, at best, a slightly inferior near-equal.

Isabelle called her *La Flemme.*

This epithet, on Isabelle's lifted upper lip and bared teeth, evoked before her eyes the image of busty, vulgar, fertile peasant girls in Flemish paintings, with red hair, big hips, and lazy, greedy, obscene mouths that hunger. Isabelle considered that certain attitudes of the Principessa were unwise, some of her contacts inappropriate, and in truth they were reckless: friendships with those opposed to the monarchy, or even Communists. This led Isabelle to conclude that the Principessa was inclined to prefer the advice of men, indeed that of her male adversaries, to the confidences of women, and even of female friends.

“She has no friends and does not want any.”

This is the conclusion that Isabelle drew, and she was deeply concerned about it; not for herself, of course, but for that '*pauvre Flamande*'.

It was then clear that, between Umberto and Galeazzo, the choice of Isabelle could only fall on the latter. But, of the many reasons that prompted her to prefer Galeazzo, one was profoundly wrong. There could be no doubt that Galeazzo was, politically and historically, the best representative of the principles of illegitimacy. That is, he typified what the conservative classes hoped and considered would be, as they put it, 'a domesticated revolution', as a domesticated revolution could be much more useful for the sake of social preservation, rather than an uncontrolled angry reaction, or a simply inept movement.

But where Isabelle made a fatal mistake was in making her choice by being persuaded, in a delusion common to many people, that Galeazzo was the Anti-Mussolini, the man who represented, in the conscience of the Italian people and in reality, the only force that could 'salvage the salvageable'. That is, specifically, he could salvage the policy of friendship with England and America, even if he wasn't truly 'the new man', that everyone was looking and waiting for. Galeazzo was too young to be considered a 'new man' at his age of thirty-six in Italy, where men do not begin to become 'new' until they are well into their seventies. But he could be at least 'the man of tomorrow', the man elevated by the gravity and darkness of the situation.

Then subsequently we saw how serious Isabelle's mistake was, and how extreme were its consequences. One day it will be agreed that Isabelle was nothing but the instrument of Fate, of the same Fate with which she had such good relations through the Vatican, to hasten and give a gestural flourish, a final fashion, to the agony of a society, and a man, doomed to die.

Into this delusion, that Galeazzo Ciano was the Anti-Mussolini, the man to whom London and Washington looked with confidence, many, not just Donna Isabelle Helene Colonna (née Sursock, of the Levantine Sursocks of Beirut, Lebanon fame, who had traveled to Rome by way of Constantinople, to dive headlong into true love with Prince Marcantonio VII Colonna), had fallen.

Galeazzo himself was completely convinced, in his limitless vanity and perennial self-satisfied optimism, that he enjoyed the sympathy of all public opinion among the English and the Americans; that he represented, in the Byzantine calculations of London and Washington, the only man in Italy capable of gathering up, after the inevitable disastrous end of the war, the complex inheritance of Mussolini. He believed he alone could

accomplish, without irreparable ruin, useless bloodshed and serious social upheavals, the transition from the disgraced Mussolini-Fascism to a new society, inspired by Anglo-Saxon Liberal civilization.

Galeazzo, then, was the only man who could give to London and Washington the guarantee of order and, above all, the necessary continuity of social structure, which the war threatened to raze to its foundations.

How could the unfortunate Isabelle not fall into this generous delusion? In her, Levantine by birth, indeed Egyptian, a love of England was part of her nature, upbringing, habits, and moral and material interests: and she was therefore led, almost predestined, to seek, or to project onto others, what she felt strongly and deeply in herself.

She had discovered in Galeazzo, in his nature, character, and outward attitudes, easily interchangeable with political attitudes, many qualities to inspire confidence. They opened her heart to great and living hopes, and they created a kind of ideal kinship between them: and they were the baser elements, Levantine, so to speak, of the Italian character, which had never been so apparent since the Fascist crisis rushed headlong, with the advent of the war, to its fatal conclusion.

Galeazzo possessed these characteristics in large quantities, and how resentful and harsh forms they took. He was aware of them; sometimes self-aware and cautious of them, sometimes even accepting of them.

Because of his family background, not Tuscan exactly, more Greek, and the bad reinforcement he received from his spectacular and unearned political fortune, his conception of wealth, power, glory, love, was a way that he embraced as that of the Eastern Pasha. He was born in Livorno, but his family had come from Formia, at Gaeta. They were simple fishermen, owners of a few miserable boats: and Livorno, among all the Italian cities, is the locale where the Levant appears in its most vivid colors and its most immediacy and truth.

There was a good reason Isabelle instinctively saw in Galeazzo another Sursock.

So, in a short time Isabelle had become the Queen of the political life of Fascist Rome.

It was understood to be ‘political’, in the wholly materialist sense the word has to the social-climbing upper crust; and to an inexperienced eye, which stops at various surface expressions of smiling triumph, Isabelle might even have looked happy. But her happy visage, as always happens by unconscious force in a corrupt society, in ruined and calamitous times, gradually took on the face of moral indifference and sad cynicism, of which the most true and honest mirror was the small court at her table in the Piazza Santi Apostoli, Palazzo Colonna.

Seated around that table was all that Rome could offer: the best and worst in terms of names, manners, reputation, and customs. Isabelle's invitations were now also the ultimate ambition, generally easily satisfied, of the female smart set; and not only the young women of Rome's upper levels, but the beauties of the North began to cross the fatal threshold.

There entered through her doorway even the neglected ones of Settentrione, the Insubri descendants, the Allobroghe and the Venetians, descended from the North to emulate their lucky Roman rivals, and more than one had managed to mix the new, olive blood of the Cianos in her womb with the ancient and illustrious blood of the Famiglias T., C., D.

In fact, Galeazzo was really more inclined to the low-born, pretty little actresses of Cinecitta Film Studios; maybe as an expression of fatigue for all things Proustian and his book *The Guermantes Way*; or perhaps out of a desperate need for at least some sort of common sincerity.

Every day, their numbers increased: the 'widows of Galeazzo', naive, temporary favorites disgraced by him. A man easily inflamed and just as easily bored in all things, so he was in his loves. The 'widows' then went to shed their tears on Isabelle, to her to share their confessions, to her to express their jealous wrath.

The so-called 'widows' days' were three times a week: in those scheduled hours, between three and five in the afternoon of those scheduled days, Isabelle received them. She welcomed them with open arms, face smiling, as if to congratulate them and share with them some escaped danger, or some unexpected bad luck: and it seemed to be an extraordinary joy, a singular pleasure, almost physical, morbidly sensual, in mixing her slightly shrill laughter and words of uncontrollable joy with the tears and lamentations of the poor 'widows'. Isabelle took a near sexual pleasure in immersing herself in the lamentations of these women motivated not by True Love, or even sincere affection, but by fury, spite, lust, jealousy, envy, humiliation and contempt.

Those were the moments when the spiritual evil genius of Isabelle, that master of intrigue and illusion, rose to the heights and near-nobility of Pure Art; of a free and fair play of selfless immorality, so truthful it was almost innocent: she laughed sympathetically, ruefully joked, took pity, wept with them, but always with her eyes shining with joy and pleasure, suffering a mysterious cosmic vengeance of tears, anger and humiliation on these poor people.

In that Art, in that game of Isabelle, *materiam superabat opus*: 'the skill far surpassed the material'.

The great secret of Isabelle, whom Rome spied upon, the secret which many tried to discover for many years, searched for in vain by the deadly

curiosity of all, might have turned out to be answered by an indiscreet eye in those moments. The pathetic and evil scene of Isabelle's triumph, and her delighted humiliation of the 'widows', would have fully revealed her secret if any involved parties had tolerated prying eyes: but the fragments that leaked from the confidences of some 'widows', amazed and disturbed by this strange joy of Isabelle, was just enough to throw a barely revealing light, if only murky and weak, on the complex, contradictory and mysterious nature of Isabelle Colonna's soul.

Every day she gathered Galeazzo and his court of pseudo-elegance, a servile, desert landscape of indifference, immorality, contempt and hatred, which was become the moral landscape of unfortunate Italy. Perhaps even Isabelle, at times, felt the dark horizon approaching toward her: but she had no eyes for all things she didn't wish to see.

She had no time for it.

She was fully absorbed in her chimerical task: drafting an architecture of intense intrigue, the structure of which was to enable Italy to pass this devastating test; to know the inevitably of defeat, and to craft a climax to this terrible myth, which was to fall, after all, finally like an Italian Andromeda into the loving arms of an English Perseus.

As everything, little by little, collapsed around her, a fact that Galeazzo accentuated more every day with the changing attitudes of his vanity and his utter detachment from the realities of Italian life, Isabelle had confirmed for her what she had known for a while. Before, and perhaps alone among all, she understood for a long time: that is, the absence of the importance of Galeazzo in Italian life; his purely formal, decorative value, his only worth as an empty figurehead. All this, far from instilling in her soul bitterness and distrust, far from unclouding her eyes, far from making her aware of her fatal mistake; all it did was strengthen her high and expansive delusion and give her new reasons for her pride of accomplishment.

Galeazzo was 'the man of tomorrow': what then did it matter if he wasn't today's man? Isabelle was left, alone, to believe in him. That young man dear to the gods, that young man on whom the benevolent and envious Fates had showered wonderful gifts and even more wonderful favors, would one day save Italy: he would carry her, Isabelle Andromeda, in his powerful arms through the raging flames, to the safe and generous breast of the Perseus of the English Empire. Into her Apostolic fervor she put the energy of a Flora MacDonald.

Nothing could shake her illusion that Galeazzo, no matter what, was the only man English and American politicians counted on: the man to whom London and Washington were ready to present, on the day of

reckoning, a resurrected, legitimate Italy. London and Washington, of course due to Isabelle's clever and tireless propaganda to the Vatican, where the British Minister Osborne had taken refuge at the war's beginning in the Holy See, knew what love and esteem the whole Italian people held for Galeazzo Ciano. The British and Americans held her champion in secret reserve for the Italian surrender, in preparation for that time which the English call 'The morning after the night before'.

Not even the spoken words of powerful friends in the Vatican, which she had in large numbers, and her devotees' expressed doubts, their advice of moderation and humility, given with lips tightened and heads tilted; not even the icy reticence of the English minister Osborne, were able to deceive Isabelle.

If anyone told her: 'Galeazzo is too dear to the gods to hope for his salvation'; if anyone told her what fate was reserved for those blessed by the gods, a fate devised by envious gods for those whom they love and envy the most, had said: 'The fate of Galeazzo is to serve as the lamb for the next, inevitable Easter, and only to this end Mussolini fattens him', certainly Isabelle's laughter would have echoed through the rooms of Palazza Colonna:

"Oh! My dear, what an idea!"

Even Isabelle too was overly loved, and also envied, by the gods.

Then, when the war had begun to show its true and mysterious face, a sort of mute agreement was made between Isabelle and Galeazzo which carried them almost by unconscious force, step by step, to an increasingly open moral indifference, to a fatalistic acceptance that comes from a too long and intimate habit of self-delusion and mutual deception.

The law that now regulated their relations was the law that held the lunches and gay parties of Palazza Colonna: it was not the Proustian law of Faubourg Saint-Germain, that of a recent Mayfair, or an even more recent Park Avenue, but that easy and generous *beaux quartiers* of Athens, Cairo, Constantinople. It was an indulgent law, based on whim and boredom, and it banished any moral doubt. In that corrupt court, in which Isabelle play-acted the part of a servile Queen, Galeazzo was now the figure of an Eastern Pasha: fat, pink, smiling, indolent, despotic.

All Galeazzo Ciano needed was slippers, fly switch and *tarbush* to be in perfect harmony with the climate of *rahat lokum*, the relaxed Eastern indolence of Palazza Colonna.

So it appeared to those who saw it, even me.

Four

Before all of this, there was a lovely day at the Golf Club dell'Acquasanta in the autumn of 1935.

"Oh no, thank God!"

So exclaimed Lord Perth: Sir James Eric Drummond, 7th Earl of Perth, GCMG, KCMG, CB, PC, DL, member of The House of Lords and the British Ambassador in Rome, then residing in the Hotel Quirinale.

The sun split a pink cloud with green edges, and a golden ray bounced off the table, making the crystal and porcelain sparkle. The immense expanse of the Agro Romano opened its deep perspectives of yellow grass before our eyes, of brown earth, of green trees, where the marble sepulchres shone alone in October, the red arches of the aqueducts. Cecilia Metella's tomb burned in the bright autumn fire, the pines and cypresses of the Via Appia swayed in the wind, fragrant with thyme and bay leaves. The gathering was now coming to an end, the sun broke into the glasses, a subtle scent of port wafted a color of honey into the air, warm and sweet. Around the table half a dozen Roman princesses of American or English origin smiled at Bobby, Lord Perth's daughter, recently married to the young Conte Sandy Manassei.

Bobby said that Beppe, a Forte dei Marmi Golf Course caddy, the one blind in one eye, on the day the British Home Fleet, in the most acute moment of diplomatic tension between England and Italy over the Ethiopian crisis, had entered in full battle readiness into the Mediterranean Sea, had told her:

"England is like Mussolini: always right, especially when wrong."

"Do you really think England is always right?" Principessa Dora Ruspoli asked Lord Perth.

"Oh no, thank God!" exclaimed Lord Perth.

"I'm curious to know," said the Principessa Jane di San Faustino, "if the other story of a caddy and the Home Fleet is true."

The story was, a few days after the appearance of the Home Fleet in the Mediterranean, Lord Perth was playing golf. His bouncing ball had fallen into a puddle of muddy water.

"Would you kindly retrieve my ball?" asked Lord Perth of his young caddy.

"Why don't you call in the Home Fleet?" the little Roman boy had answered.

The story was probably untrue, but it had delighted all of Rome.

"What a lovely story!" exclaimed Lord Perth.

The sun was beating in the face of Lord Perth, maliciously inflaming the color of his forehead, and that he had a delicate and rosy complexion; and in the lips, in the eyes of transparent blue, what every well-born Englishman has, that aspect of the childlike and feminine.

He had a wonderful shyness, a color of innocence, youthful modesty, that with the passing of the years and the growth of responsibilities and honors, rather than withers away, comes alive until it blooms wonderfully in late age. In that virtue, which in the English is accompanied by white hair, is also to blush at every moment, or perhaps not at all.

The day was golden and warm at every moment: a restless autumn day, the tombs of the Via Appia, the great Latin pines, the green and yellow expanse of the Agro Romano, that sad and solemn landscape. It made around the rosy face of Lord Perth a frame that matched delicately and vividly with his pale brow, with his blue eyes, white hair, and shy, slightly sad smile.

"Britannia may rule the waves, but she cannot waive the rules," I said, smiling.

Everyone around me laughed.

Dora Ruspoli, in her hasty and coarse cadence said, while waving her hand and extending her sallow face towards Lord Perth, "It is a great strength, for a nation not to be able to shake up the laws of tradition, isn't it?"

"To rule the waves, to waive the rules… it's a nice play on words," said Jane di San Faustino, "but I hate puns."

"It's a joke that Hammen Wafer is very proud of," I said.

"Hammen Wafer is a gossip columnist, isn't he?" Dora Ruspoli demanded of me.

"Something like that," I responded.

"You have read Cecil Beaton's *New York*?" asked William Phillips, the United States ambassador, who was sitting next to Cora Antinori.

"Cecil is a very nice guy," said William Phillips' daughter Beatrice, or, just 'B', as her friends called her.

"And it's a delightful book," said Cora Antinori.

"A pity," said Jane di San Faustino, "that Italy doesn't have a writer like Cecil Beaton. Italian writers are so provincial and boring. They have no sense of humor."

"It's not entirely their fault," I said, "They have no material. Italy is a province, and Rome is a provincial capital. Can you imagine a book about Rome written by Cecil Beaton?"

“Why not?” said Dorothy di Frasso. “When it comes to gossip, Rome has nothing to envy New York. Rome lacks not gossip, but a gossip writer like Cecil Beaton. Think of the gossip of the Pope and the Vatican. As for me, I have never aroused so much gossip in New York as I have in Rome. And what about you, my dear Dora!”

“Nobody ever gossiped about me,” said Dora Ruspoli, casting Dorothy a look of offended dignity.

“They just treat us like courtyard hens,” said Jane di San Faustino, “and that, at least, rejuvenates us!”

Everyone laughed.

Cora Antinori said, “That fact of living in a province is perhaps not the only reason why Italian writers are boring. Even in the provinces, there can be funny writers.”

“The same in New York, after all,” said Dora, “and it’s a provincial town.”

“What an idea!” exclaimed Jane, looking at Dora with scorn.

“It also depends partly on the nature of the language,” said Lord Perth.

“Language is of great importance,” I said, “not only for writers, but for peoples and states. Wars, in a sense, are syntax errors.”

“Or simple errors of pronunciation,” said William Phillips. “It now is no longer the ancient time, in fact, in which the word Italy and the word England were spelled differently, but pronounced in the same way.”

“Maybe,” said Lord Perth, “It is a question of pronunciation: and precisely what I ask myself every time I leave an interview with Mussolini.”

I pictured Lord Perth talking to Mussolini in the immense hall of the Palazzo Venezia.

“Usher in the English Ambassador,” says Mussolini to Quntio Navarra, his chief assistant.

The door opens obediently to the discreet gesture of Navarra, and Lord Perth crosses the threshold, walking slowly on the polished stained marble floor towards the massive walnut table placed in front of the large 16th century fireplace. Mussolini stands, leaning with his back on the table, or the fireplace, waits smiling, then moves towards Lord Perth: now the two men are facing each other, Mussolini all collected of himself, but at the same time tense in his continuous exertion of appearance and from the effort of offering an attitude of friendliness.

Mussolini swings his huge swollen head, white, round, fat, bald, to which the large cyst protruding from the occiput, just behind the ear, adds

horrible weight; Lord Perth stands straight, smiling, cautious and shy, the forehead illuminated by a slight childlike blush.

Mussolini believes in himself, if he believes in anything; but does not believe in the incompatibility of logic and luck, of a conflict between will and destiny. His voice is warm, grave, yet delicate, a voice that sometimes has a strange, profound ring of something feminine.

Lord Perth does not believe in the same things.

'Oh no, Thank God'! He believes in strength, prestige, the eternity of the Home Fleet and the Bank of England, in the sense of humor of the Fleet, in fair play from the Bank of England.

He believes in the close relationship between the playing fields of Eton and the battlefields of Waterloo. Mussolini is there, in front of him, all alone: and Mussolini knows he does not represent anything or anyone.

He only represents himself.

Lord Perth is but the representative of His British Majesty, the King of England.

Mussolini asks, "How do you do?" as if to actually ask, "I want to know how you are."

Lord Perth asks, "How do you do?" as if to say, "I really don't care to know how you are."

Mussolini speaks with the accent of a peasant from Romagna, pronouncing the words *problem*, *Mediterranean*, *Suez*, *Ethiopia*, as if pronouncing the words *scopone*, *lambrusco*, *commizio*, *Forli*.

Lord Perth has the accent of an undergraduate of Oxford, with some distant ancestor from Scotland, and the accent of Magdalen College, of the Hotel Mitra, of Mesopotamia and of Perthshire.

He pronounces the words *problem, Mediterranean, Suez, Ethiopia,* as if saying the words *cricket, Serpentine, whisky, Edinburgh*. His face is smiling but impassive, his lips move slightly, barely touching the words, his gaze is deep and secret, as if looking with closed eyes.

Mussolini's face is pale and swollen, crumpled into an amiable grimace of deliberate serenity and forced complacency, his thick lips move as if to suck on the words, his eyes are wide and round, his gaze fixed and restless at the same time. It's the look of a man who knows what is poker and what is not poker. Perth's gaze is that of a man who knows what is cricket and what is not cricket.

The play continues:

M: "I want."
LP: "I would like."

M: “I don’t want.”
LP: “We cannot.”
M: “I think.”
LP: “I suppose, may I suggest, may I propose, may I believe.”
M: “Unequivocally.”
LP: “Rather, maybe, perhaps, almost, probably.”
M: “My opinion.”
LP: “The Public opinion.”
M: “The Fascist Revolution.”
LP: “Italy.”
M: “The King.”
LP: “His Majesty The King.”
M: “I.”
LP: “The British Empire.”

Here the scene ends.

“Also Anthony Eden,” said Dorothy di Frasso, “had some difficulty in reaching understanding with Mussolini. It seems that they did not pronounce the same words in the same way.”

With that, Dora Ruspoli began to describe the queer and erratic behaviors that aroused the desperate fascination of Roman society during the recent stay of Anthony Eden. On arrival, after a lunch at the British Embassy, Eden went out alone, on foot. It was 15:00. By 18:00, he had not returned, and Lord Perth got apprehensive.

Just before dark, a young staff member of the French Embassy reported on Eden’s whereabouts. This secretary had only a few days prior come to Palazzo Farnese directly from Quai d’Orsay, Paris, and was staying in Rome, following in the footsteps of Chateaubriand and Stendhal. He was making his novice’s tribute, exploring the stairs and corridors of the Vatican Museum, and saw sitting on the lid of an Etruscan Sarcophagus, between the club of Hercules and long, pale thigh of Diana, a young blond man with a delicate mustache. The man was immersed in reading a book bound in dark leather; a specimen, at least so it seemed, of Horace’s *Odes*.

This young secretary of the French Ambassador recalled the face from photographs published in Rome newspapers on the front pages and had, in that solitary reader, found the missing Anthony Eden.

Eden, in the fading half-light of the Vatican Museum, was resting: reading the *Odes* of Horace; free for that moment from the tedium of lunches and official receptions, of talks and diplomatic negotiations, and

perhaps, who knows, even the invincible boredom of every well-born Englishman which underlies his being when left to think about himself.

This discovery the young Secretary from the French Embassy discreetly disclosed to all his colleagues, to three or four Roman princes he met at Circolo della Caccia, and to the entire Excelsior Bar. The revelation had tremendously excited Roman society, so apathetic by nature, by tradition and vanity.

That evening, at a dinner with Isabelle Colonna, we spoke of nothing else!

Isabelle was delighted.

This simple biographical data, even if seemingly insignificant, was suddenly to her sublime and revealing. Eden and Horace! Isabelle could not recall one single verse of Horace, but it seemed to her there must undoubtedly be something in common between Eden and the old, dear, lovable Latin poet. She was annoyed in her heart that she hadn't discovered, that no-one had told her, what there was in common between Eden and Horace.

The next morning, by 10:00 AM, all the Roman elite, as if by total, cosmic coincidence, had suddenly converged inside the Vatican Museum. Each casually carried under their arm, or clutched with white knuckles in jealous hands, a copy of Horace's *Odes*.

But Eden didn't show up, and by noon they all straggled away, disappointed. It was stifling hot in the Museum, and Isabelle stopped to rest in a window ledge with Dora Ruspoli, to breath some cool air, and get away from the 'silly crowd' of 'those people'.

She gestured at a statue and said, "My dear Dora, look at that one, doesn't it look like Anthony? It's an Apollo, no doubt. Oh! Anthony looks like Apollo, he is a glorious young Apollo!"

Dora got up from her seat and approached the statue (being horribly near-sighted), and observed it carefully through the rosy veil of her squinting myopia.

"It's not an Apollo, my dear Isabelle, come here and take a closer look."

It was in fact a female statue, perhaps Diana, maybe Venus.

Isabelle retorted, "Gender is unimportant in these matters. you don't think it looks like him all the same?"

The old, dusty, half-forgotten Horace had, within a few hours, become blazingly fashionable.

At the tables of the Golf Club dell'Acquasanta, on the red and white plaid table covers, next to pouches of Hermes, packs of Camel Gold Flake, Dunhill lighters; suddenly none lacked a 'Horace by Schiaparelli': that is,

a copy of Horace wrapped in a cloth, scarf, handkerchief or silk envelope by Schiaparelli; as in the latest issue of *Vogue*, she advised protecting books from the burning sands of marine beaches and the damp dust of golf courses with, naturally, one of her own wondrous products.

A book was found artfully abandoned on one of the tables: it was an ancient Venetian example of Horace's *Odes*, with a magnificent 16th Century binding and gold inlays.

Imprinted in the binding shined (though the gold was a bit faded from the centuries) was the heraldry of the Colonna Family. The Sursock arms were missing from the cover, but everyone immediately guessed it was the ostentatiously forgotten 'evening reading' of Isabelle Colonna.

One morning, Eden was spotted at Castel Fusano Beach, and as soon as the news spread in Rome, it was all a parade of luxurious cars on the Ostia motorway. But Eden, after a short swim and a brief sunbath on the beach, left, only staying perhaps an hour: he was gone before they got there, and they all trundled back to Rome overheated and irritated.

That evening, at Dorothy di Frasso's house, the sole subject was the treasure hunt, the wild goose chase. Much was said and joked about, no-one was exempt from being the expense of the conversation. Dorothy spared no-one except Isabelle: who, Dorothy stated, had discovered that a Sursock ancestor of hers lived for many years in Constantinople at the time of Edward VII, in London during the reign of Abdul Hamid, and had translated Horace's *Odes* into Classical Christian Aramaic Syriac.

There was, then, something in common between the Sursocks, the Colonnas, Horace and now, naturally, The Englishman Anthony Eden; this unexpected relationship gifted Isabelle with fulfilling pride.

Then, without any warning at all, Anthony Eden left for London.

This catastrophe was clearly someone's fault.

At the Golf Club dell'Acquasanta everyone regarded each other with suspicion, like jealous spouses, or with the sadness of broken confidence, like unfaithful lovers.

Someone, coming from holiday at Forte dei Marmi in Tuscany, arrived early at Isabelle Colonna's for a luncheon, and repeated to her an innocently funny joke of Jane's: an allusion to the banquet ritual which in the Levant follows funerals, and so, offended, Isabelle Colonna née Sursock of Beirut, Lebanon, canceled the luncheon at the last moment.

So Dora dropped everything and hurriedly entrained to the Forte dei Marmi in Tuscany to spill to Jane, and to explain to her, a full account of the facts and gossip of that wonderful week, the week of Anthony Eden, and of all the passionate excitement of Rome and its aftermath.

“What an extraordinary city Rome is!” said Lord Perth. “You breathe eternity in the air. Everything becomes the stuff of legend, even worldly gossip. So here is Anthony Eden entered into legend. A mere week’s stay in the Eternal City, and he enters into eternity.”

Jane, still even now sensitive about the matter, exclaimed, “Yes, but he certainly fled from eternity quickly, didn’t he, the wicked one!”

She turned to Dora Ruspoli.

“Ah! But you too, my dear Dora! I saw you from across the street with such a face that day Eden left! How you looked! You look it again now!”

Jane said, “I said to myself right away: That's it, look at Dora, something’s happened, she looks as if she’s bumped her *little Jew*!”[2]

2. Folklore or legend has it that, in historical France, Jewish merchants often dealt in cloth; and would measure lengths with the hand-to-elbow span, much like the traditional cubit. In winding out product behind a counter or table, the merchant would sometimes hit the elbow on that hard surface: bump their funny bone, as it’s called in English; with the usual resulting reaction and facial expression.

So, a common expression was ‘*le petit juif*’: The Little Jew, which could mean either actually bumping the funny bone, or the reactions associated with that.

Five

At the Golf Club dell'Acquasanta, in November, 1942, Galeazzo Ciano appeared in the entrance.

Paola said, "Do you find him changed as well?"

"Even Galeazzo has changed," I said.

"Everyone has changed. Everyone anticipates the *Kapparoth*, the final Kaputt, the Big Cat's attack, for the leopard to pounce."

"What?" exclaimed Paola, opening her eyes wide.

Galeazzo paused on the threshold for a moment, rubbing his hands together. He laughed, pursed his lips, and lifted up his chin, he greeted the room with wide open eyes; he proffered a friendly smile without opening his lips. He looked long at the women, with only a brief look at the men. Then he strode through the room imperiously, his stomach sucked in, trying to hide weight gain, always rubbing his hands and turning his face here and there.

He went to sit at a table at a prominent corner, where he was immediately joined by Cyprienne del Drago, Blasco d'Ayeta and Marcello del Drago.

The voices, which sat down into a low whisper when Galeazzo arrived, rose to their feet and all began to speak loudly to one another across the tables, as if they were communicating from opposite banks of a river.

They all called each other by name, from one end of the room to the other, then turned to look at Galeazzo to ensure they were noticed and heard by him: that was the only aim of those calls, those little festive cries, those smiles and those flying glances. Every now and then Galeazzo would raise his eyes, take part in the general conversation, and he spoke loudly, staring now at this girl or that girl. His gaze never rested on men, as if there were only women in the room.

He smiled, winked slyly, made brief gestures with an eyebrow raised, or with his lips, which were fleshy and protruding; flirtations to which the women responded by laughing too loudly, bending over the table with their heads twisted sideways as if for better hearing, peering and watching each other with jealous fascination.

Lavinia, Gianna, Georgette, Anne Marie von Bismark, Prince Otto von Bismark, and two young secretaries of the Palazzo Chigi sat down at the table next to mine.

“Everyone looks so happy today,” said Anne Marie, turning to me. “Is there anything new going on?"

“What new thing could happen, in Rome?” I replied

“In Rome, I'm here again,” said Filippo Anfuso, approaching the table of the von Bismarks.

It seemed Filippo had returned to Rome that morning from Budapest, where he had recently been sent to replace Minister Giuseppe Talamo in the Italian Legation.

“Oh, Filippo!” exclaimed Anne Marie.

“Filippo! Filippo!”

You could hear his name being called around the room.

Filippo turned here and there, smiling. He had his typical awkward look. He moved his head as if he had a boil on his neck, and he did not know, as usual, what to do with his hands, which he placed on his hips, put in his pockets, hung inertly like bags on strings.

He looked like a wooden marionette, freshly carved, painted and varnished, and the gleaming blackness of his pomaded hair seemed excessive even for a Minister like him. He laughed, his eyes twinkled, his beautiful eyes, always mysterious. As he laughed he blinked rapidly with his usual languid and sentimental air. His physical weak point was his knees, bent a little inward until they almost touched. He was aware of this weakness, his only real shortcoming. He suffered it in secret silence.

"Filippo!”

“Filippo!"

I noticed that Galeazzo had stopped in the middle of a sentence, and had looked up, darkening in the face.

He was quite envious of Filippo. I marveled that he was still jealous of the other man. Too, Galeazzo shared with Filippo that weak point in the knees. Perhaps the only thing the two men had in common was their knock-knees; and perhaps both recognized the fault, and saw it in the other.

"The Americans landed in Algeria yesterday," said Filippo, sitting down at the von Bismark’s table, between Anne Marie and Lavinia.

"That's one reason among two, that everyone is happy today."

"Hold your tongue, Filippo, don't say cruel things," said Anne Marie.

"To be fair, I must say that they are all just as happy today, as they were the day Rommel came to El Alamein," said Filippo.

Six

Four months earlier, in June, when Italian and German troops under Rommel's command had rushed on El Alamein, and it seemed as if they were about to capture Alexandria and Cairo, Mussolini hurriedly engaged to fly to the Egyptian front. He threw on the uniform of Marshal of the Italian Empire, and carried with him in his baggage the famous 'Sword of Islam' which Italo Balbo, Governor of Libya, had solemnly presented to him a few years prior.

Mussolini's entourage also included Serafino Mazzolini, whom Il Duce planned to install in Cairo with great pomp, sporting the title ‘Governor of Egypt’. Mazzolini had already been appointed Egypt’s Governor *in absentia* as a member of Mussolini’s cabinet, and had previously been Minister of Italy in Cairo.

Mazzolini left in a great hurry by plane for the front of El Alamein, accompanied by a battalion of secretaries, typists, interpreters, experts on Arab issues, and a brilliant officer staff in which intelligence abounded. They already fought with and snarled at each other, pushing onto the Libyan desert their jealous and vain quarrels: lovers, husbands, brothers, cousins of Galeazzo's favorites, and some of Edda's beautiful, proud, and melancholy lovers, now discarded and fallen into disgrace.

The war in Libya, Filippo said, did not bring good luck to the favorites of the Edda and Galeazzo harems: whenever the British, in the alternating advances in the battles of the desert, stepped forward, some of those courtly characters fell into in their hands. Meanwhile, the news was beginning to reach Rome from the front that Mussolini was so insistent to make his triumphant entry into Alexandria and Cairo that Rommel had lost all patience and, furious with Mussolini at such fantastical pressures, he refused to meet with Il Duce at all.

"What did he come here to do?" shouted Rommel."Who sent this *person* to us?"

Mussolini, infuriated by the interminable waiting, paced up and down, silent and black, in front of the poor Mazzolini, Governor of Egypt, who sat immobile, silent and white. In Rome were still fresh, burning, the wounds that Mazzolini’s appointment had inflicted on the vanity and crushed ambitions of the inflamed courtiers of the Palazzo Colonna and Palazzo Chigi.

The real problem of the moment, for many, was not military: some way to conquer Egypt; but rather some tactical maneuver to prevent Mazzolini from reaching Cairo; ultimately, for that desired strategic defeat, all depended on the British. Galeazzo himself, although for quite different reasons, was dissatisfied with the way things were going, and he outwardly displayed an air of ironic detachment.

"Oh yes! That business in Cairo!" he exclaimed, as if to say Mussolini would never enter.

But in the end, what comforted Galeazzo during the time of so much bitterness, those awful days of Rommel's victories, was the fact, or so Filippo recounted, that Mussolini was absent from Rome, if only for a few days. All were finally, as Galeazzo was reported to have said, 'allowed out of their cages'.

Seven

"The relations between Galeazzo and Mussolini," I observed, "don't look very good even today, at least according to the word in Stockholm."

"*He may wish his father-in-law some minor defeat*," said Filippo in French, expertly imitating the dialect of a Marseilles fisherman.

"You are not going to pretend that the war, for them, is only a matter of family house cleaning," said Anne Marie.

"Alas!" exclaimed Filippo, sighing loudly and looking up at the ceiling with his mysterious eyes.

"Cyprienne looks bored today," said Georgette, looking over at Galeazzo's table.

"Cyprienne is too witty," said Filippo, "to find Galeazzo clever."

"After all, it's quite true, Galeazzo, in the long run, is a rather boring man," said Anne Marie.

"I find him, on the contrary, very witty and very amusing," said Prince Otto von Bismark.

"And undoubtedly a lot more fun than von Ribbentrop," said Filippo. "Do you know what Ribbentrop says of Galeazzo?"

"Of course we do," said Otto von Bismark, in a nervous voice.

"No we don't know," said Anne Marie. "So tell us!"

"Ribbentrop says Galeazzo would be a fine foreign minister, if only he didn't deal with foreign policy."

"As the minister of foreign policy," I said, "it must be recognized that he is very little concerned with it. His fault is to be too concerned with domestic politics."

"It's so true," said Filippo. "He does nothing but this, from morning to night. His anteroom has become a branch of the Ministry of the Interior and the leadership of the Fascist Party."

"The appointment of a regional prefect or Federal secretary," said one of the two young secretaries, "is more important to him than the appointment of an ambassador."

"Muti was his creature," said the other secretary.

"But now they hate each other to death," said Filippo. "I believe they broke with each other on the question of the appointment of Count Magistrati as Minister to Sofia."

"What did Muti have to do with that?" demanded von Bismark.

"Galeazzo did domestic politics and Muti did foreign policy," responded Filippo. “Muti objected and Galeazzo overruled him.”

"Galeazzo is a strange man," I said. "He deludes himself that he is popular in American and England."

"That’s nothing," said Filippo. "He believes himself to be popular in Italy!"

"If it makes him happy," said von Bismark.

"Me, I love him a lot,” said Anne Marie.

"If you believe he will change the course of the war!" Filippo said with a strange expression, blushing.

Anne Marie smiled, and looked directly at Filippo. "You like him a lot too, don't you?"

"I like him very much, of course," said Filippo, "but what good is that? if I were his mother I would tremble for him."

"Why don't you tremble for him, if you love him," said Anne Marie.

"I don’t have time. I'm too busy trembling for myself."

"Ah, but what’s gotten into you all today?" said Lavinia. "Perhaps it’s the war that makes you so nervous."

"The war?" Filippo said.

"What war? People don't care about war. Haven't you seen the billboards that Mussolini hangs in all the shops and posted on all the walls in the streets?"

These were large tricolor signs, in which these words alone were printed in large letters:

WE ARE AT WAR

"He did well to remind us," added Filippo. "because no one remembers it anymore."

"The state of mind of the Italian people in this war is really very curious," said von Bismark.

"I wonder,” said Filippo, “onto whom Mussolini would throw responsibility for things, if the war went badly."

"On the Italian people," I said.

"No, Mussolini never puts the responsibility for anything on many heads. He needs only one head. One of those heads that seems made for this kind of thing. He would throw it on Galeazzo. If not, what would he do, Galeazzo? Mussolini keeps his head around just for that. Look at his head: doesn't it just seem made for that on purpose?"

We all turned our eyes to Galeazzo: it was true, he had a large, theatrically round head, a little swollen, a bit too large, it seemed.

"A little too big for his age," said Filippo. “It’s a child’s head.”

"You are unbearable!" said Anne Marie.

"I thought you were friends with Galeazzo," I said to Filippo.

"Galeazzo doesn't need friends, and doesn't want any. He doesn’t know what to do with them. He despises them and treats them as his servants," said Filippo; then added laughing, "The friendship of Mussolini is enough for him."

“Mussolini likes him very much, isn’t that right?” asked Georgette.

"Oh, yes, a lot!” said Filippo.

“In February 1941, during that unfortunate Greek campaign, Galeazzo had me come to Bari to discuss urgent matters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was a very difficult time for him.

“He was then a lieutenant colonel in a bomber squadron, at the Palese base, near Bari. He was very agitated about Mussolini. He called him 'The Blockhead'. There was, in those days, the Bordighera conference, where Mussolini had met with Franco and Serrano Suñer. At the very last moment, Galeazzo, already packed with suitcase in hand, ready to leave, was ordered to remain at home.

“He said to me: “Mussolini hates me."

“That same evening Edda telephoned him that his eldest son Fabrizio was seriously ill. That news deeply disturbed Galeazzo. So he began to cry, in an unmanly way, and said to me, "He hates me, there is nothing to do, he hates me." Then he added, “He always hurts me, that man, he brings me misfortune."”

"Misfortune?" said Lavinia laughing. "Ah, my God, how silly men are!"

"If I'm not mistaken, Galeazzo then wanted to resign," said Gianna.

"No. Galeazzo will never go of his own free will," said Filippo. "He likes power too much. He sleeps with his Minister's chair as with a mistress. He trembles for fear of being sent away at any moment, that if he rises from his seat he will be kicked in his… behind."

"In those days in Bari,” I said, “Galeazzo also had another reason to be afraid. It was precisely in those days that Hitler gave Mussolini, during their meeting at Brennero, the Gestapo memorandum by Himmler against Galeazzo."

"Wasn't it rather a memorandum against Isabelle Colonna?" said Anne Marie.

"What do you know of it?" asked her husband, von Bismark, with an uneasiness in his voice.

"Well, all of Rome talked about it for a month," said Anne Marie.

"It was a bad time for Galeazzo," said Filippo. "Even his closest friends turned their backs on him. Blasco d'Ayeta told me on that occasion that, if came to a choice between Galeazzo and Isabelle, he would be on the side of Isabelle."

I said, "And a choice between between Hitler and Isabelle?"

Without waiting for Filippo I continued.

"It was not, of course, a matter of having to choose between Galeazzo and Isabelle: but that's what people think. Sometimes, talking about the war, Mussolini, Hitler, he says the most clever things. I cannot deny him craft, spirit and ingenuity. Some of his ways of judging political situations are those of a man who knows his own facts, and also those of others. One day I asked him what he thought the probable outcome of the war to be."

"And he answered you how?" asked von Bismark with a fixed smile.

I said, "That it was not yet possible to say which nations would win the war, but that it was known which nations had already lost it."

"And which nations have already lost the war?" asked von Bismark.

"Poland and Italy."

"It's not very interesting who will lose it," said Anne Marie. "I would like to know who wins it."

""Don't be indiscreet," said Filippo. "That's a state secret."

"It is not true that it's a state secret?" he added, turning to von Bismark.

"Of course," said von Bismark.

"Sometimes, in his judgments, Galeazzo is incredibly reckless," said Filippo. "If the walls of his Palazzo Chigi and Isabelle's table could speak, Mussolini and Hitler would hear some funny things."

"He should be more careful," said Georgette. "Isabelle's table does speak."

"Again with this old story about that memorandum!" said von Bismark.

Eight

When, in early 1941, Hitler handed over to Mussolini in their meeting at Brennero the memorandum of Himmler against Galeazzo, the news aroused in the Roman world first astonishment, then fear, then an open and evil delight. But around Isabelle's table they laughed at that memorandum as if making a bad joke of unfaithful, or at least indiscreet, servants and staff.

"Hitler, what a fool!" said Isabelle.

In that memorandum, in fact, Galeazzo was not so much targeted as was Isabelle, who Himmler called 'The Fifth Column'.

Day by day, all the conversations that took place at that table were related word for word, with scrupulous accuracy: and not only the words of Galeazzo, Edda, Isabelle, but the observations of those guests to whom they assigned any importance. The names, social ranks, the political positions, the places they occupied in the order of the state; not only the judgments of Galeazzo, or of foreign diplomats who frequented Isabelle’s table, on the war and on the errors of the policies of Hitler and Mussolini, but even the worldly gossip, female backbiting, and so on down to the innocent words of minor characters, such as Marcello del Drago or Mario Pansa.

Edda's *bon mots* on this or that, on Hitler, on von Ribbentrop, on von Mackensen; the tales of her frequent travels to Budapest, Berlin, and Vienna; Galeazzo's indiscretions on Mussolini or Franco, on Horty, on Pavelić, on Pétain and Antonescu; the sharp judgments of Isabelle on Mussolini's vulgar loves and her bitter predictions on the outcome of the war; all together with the amiable Florentine gossips of Sandra Apaletti; scandalous jokes about some young German or Italian actress from Cinecetta Studios; the loves of Goebbels and Pavolini.

Everything, Everyone, was the subject of that meticulously compiled report.

A great part was devoted to the sordid love life of Galeazzo, to his inconstancy, to the jealousy of his favorites, to the corruption of his little court; but what had really saved him from Mussolini's deadly wrath was the high honor which Himmler's memorandum bestowed upon Edda.

That memorandum of Himmler’s Gestapo would have had fatal consequences for Galeazzo, had it omitted any word against Edda: about her many lovers, on the *liaisons dangereuses* of her friends, on the

scandals of Cortina d'Ampezzo and Capri. But the memorandum did in fact contain all of it, and much, much more.

The vicious Gestapo charges against his own daughter had forced Mussolini to defend his son-in-law. Himmler's memorandum had not failed, however, to spread suspicion in the courts of Galeazzo and Isabelle. Who provided Himmler with the contents of that report? The servants of Palazzo Colonna? Isabelle’s butler? Some of the intimate friends shared by Isabelle and Galeazzo? They discussed the names of this person and that person, suspected it might be a young woman wounded in her pride by the recent fortune of a rival.

Every one of Galeazzo’s 'widows' was discreetly questioned, scrutinized, and searched.

"In any case, it's neither you nor I," said Isabelle to Galeazzo.

"Definitely not I," said Galeazzo.

"What a story it is!" sighed Isabelle, looking up at her dining room ceiling, a fresco by Poussin.

The only practical consequence of Himmler's memorandum had been the temporary removal of Galeazzo from Rome: he had left for Bari, destined to a bomber squadron based at Palese, and about him, for some time, in Isabelle’s rooms and the Palazzo Chigi itself, we spoke of him in a low voice or with ostentatious indifference.

But Isabelle, although deeply wounded by that "Definitely not I", remained faithful to Galeazzo in her heart: it's not easily that at her age a woman can admit to being mistaken.

He was thought of then, by her, not as a man fallen into permanent disgrace, but as a man who could fall into disgrace in one moment, then elevated the next.

To borrow a sports term, it was simple: "The ball wasn't now at his foot."

Nine

"I'll bet," said Anne Marie, turning gracefully to Filippo, "that in Himmler's report there was not a single word about you."

"There was a whole page about my wife," responded Filippo, "and that was enough."

"A whole page on Maria? Ah! Poor Maria, what an honor," said Georgette without a hint of malice.

"And on me? Was there also a whole page about me?" demanded Anne Marie, laughing.

"Your question," I replied, "is the same sort of question that General von Schobert once asked me, during the campaign in Ukraine."

I recounted the tale of *stoppa* and steppe, and of chicks and poultry raising.

"Ah! My God!" exclaimed Anne Marie, laughing delightedly.

"That's very funny," said von Bismark, smiling wryly.

"You are sure," said Filippo, "that General von Schobert didn't understand what you meant?"

"It's so adorable!" exclaimed Anne Marie, clapping her hands.

Everyone laughed, but von Bismark regarded me with a strange look.

He said, "You have a lot of talent, Curzio, for telling funny stories. But I don't like your chicks, or your *stoppa* or your steppe."

"Me, I love them!" said Anne Marie.

"I can confess the truth to her," I said, turning to von Bismark. "In Italy, in fact chicks are raised tied to strings. But it's a truth that cannot be told. Let us remember: 'WE ARE AT WAR'."

At this point Marcello del Drago approached the von Bismark table.

He said, "War? Do you still talk about the war? You couldn't do anything else? War has gone out of fashion."

"Yes, indeed, it is a bit outdated," said Georgette. "We don't wear it anymore, this year."

"Galeazzo begs me to ask you," said Marcello to Filippo, "if you can come to the Ministry for a moment today."

"Why not?" said Filippo with an ironic but slightly hostile air. "I'm paid for it."

"Around five, okay?"

"Six o'clock would be better.”

"Okay, six o'clock, then," said Marcello.

He tilted his head, gesturing toward a young woman sitting at a table not far from us, and asked who she was.

"What? You don't know Brigitte?" asked Anne Marie. "She is a great friend of mine. She's very pretty, isn't she?"

"Lovely," said Marcello, and on his way to return to Galeazzo’s table he turned back twice to look at her.

Meanwhile people began to go out, moving away from the tables, across the meadows and towards the golf course.

We sat talking, and a little later we saw Mario Pansa accompanying Galeazzo towards the table of Brigitte.

Anne Marie observed that Galeazzo was gaining weight.

"During the other war," said Filippo, "all were losing weight; in this one everyone gets fat. The world is really upside down! Who understands anything anymore?"

von Bismark responded, maybe sarcastically, maybe not, that people displaying plumpness was a sign of moral health.

"Europe," he said,”is sure to win out.”

I said that the people were thin, and that it was enough to travel across Europe to see how thin the people were.

"And yet," I added, "people are sure they are winning the war."

"Which people?" demanded von Bismark.

"All peoples, really, even the German, naturally," I said.

"You said, 'naturally',” said von Bismark with an icy tone.

"The leanest are the workers of Europe," I said. "Also the German workers, of course; yet, among all, the German workers are the ones most sure of winning the war."

"You think this?" said von Bismark, incredulous.

Galeazzo was standing in front of Brigitte, talking loudly as was his custom, turning his head here and there and laughing. Brigitte, sitting with elbows resting on the table, face framed in both hands, looked at him raising her beautiful eyes full of innocence. Then Brigitte stood up, and with Galeazzo went out into the garden. They walked around the pool talking languidly. Galeazzo presented as the gallant, looking around with his proud, cordial, theatrical frown.

All of us watched the scene, winking at each other with an air of understanding.

“Well, that's that!” said Anne Marie.

"Brigitte is really a charming woman," said von Bismark.

"Galeazzo is much loved by women," said Georgette.

"There isn’t a woman here who hasn't had an affair with him,” said Filippo.

"I know a few who have been able to stand up to him," said Anne Marie.

"Yes, but they’re not here," said Filippo.

"What do you know?" said Anne Marie with a mild aggressive lunge.

At this point Brigitte returned, alone, and approached Anne Marie. She was cheerful, she laughed with her somewhat deep laugh.

"Be careful, Brigitte, Galeazzo wins all his wars," said Filippo.

"Oh! I know, I have already been warned. Me, on the contrary, I lose all my wars," said Brigitte. "But I'm tired of war, and he doesn’t interest me at all."

Anne Marie said, in a tone of disbelief, "Really."

We too all went out into the garden, headed for the first tee, in an autumn sun that smelled of honey and withered flowers. The players appeared and disappeared in the undulating terrain, like swimmers rising and descending in ocean swells.

You could see the clubs’ shafts rising, glistening in the sun, the players raising their arms to the sky, staying a moment with hands pressed together in an attitude of prayer; then the clubs swung, and described a wide curve in the green and pink air. They disappeared, rose up sparkling: it was like a ballet on an immense stage. The wind made sweet music in the grass.

Voices bounced on the meadows, green, yellow, red, blue voices, to which the distance gave an elastic sound, soft and dim. A group of young women sat in the grass, joking and laughing. They all turned their faces towards Galeazzo, who was walking not far away with Blasco d’Ayeta; he reviewed that youthful, mischievous and inviting host. It was a bouquet of the most beautiful faces and the most beautiful names in Rome; confused among those, but with more laughing, were the rosiest flesh, lively eyes, redder mouths, the most free and frank ways, some of the youngest and most beautiful women of Florence, of Venice, of Lombard.

And which one was dressed in red, which in blue, which in a subdued gray, which in a nude, skin-colored cloth. Which one wore short curly hair, rightly proud of her Ephesian forehead and her pure mouth, which wore her hair braided at the nape of her neck, which with hair raised on the temples; all offered laughing their faces lit by the sun and the living air: Marita with the appearance of Alcibiades, Paola with that of Fornarina, Lavinia with that of Amorrorisca, Bianca of Diana, Patricia of Selvaggia, Manuela of Fiammetta, Giorgina of Beatrice, Enrica of Laura.

Something of temple attendants, and yet innocence, was on those faces, in those eyes, in those lips.

A corrupted glory shone in those white, rosy faces, in those looks that the work of the lashes arced into sensual modesty. Long sinews of wind passed through the warm air, a proud sun gilded the trunks of the pines, the ruins of the tombs above the Via Appia, bricks, stones, and fragments of ancient marble, scattered among the trees at the far edges of the meadow. Sitting around the pool, young Anglophiliac people spoke English to each other too loudly, a few words coming to us smelling a mixture of Capstan and Craven.

The old Roman princesses walked up and down, figures made slightly golden on the fairway from the weary autumn fire: nées Smith, Brown, Samuel, the solemn dowagers leaning on staffs with silver knobs, the faded beauties of D'Annunzio's now slow-moving generation, with black-rimmed eyes and long tapering white fingers.

A shouting, loose-haired young girl in a pure white dress chased a young, shouting blonde boy dressed in plus-fours.

It was a lively scene, but already a little tired, slightly out of focus, and creased at the edges like a faded old colored print.

Galeazzo saw me and left Blasco. He approached, placing his hand on my shoulder. I hadn't seen him for over a year, and I didn't know what to say to him.

"When did you come back?" He asked with reproach in his voice, "And why didn't you come to see me immediately?"

He spoke to me confidently, with a relaxed kind of abandon, very rare in him. I replied that I had been very ill, in Finland, that I was still very weak.

"I'm very tired," I added.

"Tired?" he said. "You mean disgusted."

"Yes, I’ve got disgusted with everything."

He looked at me, and after a moment he said, "You will see that soon things will get better."

"Better? How? Italy is a dead country. What do you want to do with a dead man? All that remains is to bury it."

"You never know," he said.

"Maybe you are right, my friend, you never know.”

Who knew I couldn't help him in return for his friendship, one day?

"Be careful of the old man," I told him.

"I know, he hates me. He hates everyone. Sometimes I wonder if he's crazy. You believe that something can be done? Do you think that something can still be done?"

"There is nothing more to do now. It's too late. You had to do something in 1940, to prevent him from dragging Italy into this shameful war."

"In 1940?" he said, and laughed in a way I didn't like.

Then he added: "War could also be good."

I kept silent.

He felt the pain and hostility in my silence, and said, "I am not to blame. It's he who wanted war. What I could do?"

"Leave, depart."

"To go? And then?"

"Then? Nothing."

"It wouldn't have done any good," he said.

"It wouldn't have done any good. But you had to leave. And then, not now," I said.

"Leave, leave, every time we talk about these things, that's all you say! Don't tell me anymore. Leave! And then?"

Galeazzo left me with a sudden, angry turning movement, and with quick steps he started towards the Club. I saw him stop for a moment on the threshold, then he entered.

I stayed a while longer walking on the lawn with my cane, then I too entered the Club.

Galeazzo was sitting at the bar, between Cyprienne and Brigitte, and around him were Anne Marie, Paola, Marita, Georgette, Filippo, Marcello del Drago, Bonarelli, Blasco d'Ayeta, and a very young girl whom I didn't know. Galeazzo was recounting how he had presented the declaration of war to France and England.

When the French Ambassador, François-Poncet, entered his office at Palazzo Chigi, Galeazzo welcomed him cordially and immediately got to the point.

"You certainly understand, Sir, why I asked to speak to you."

"I'm usually not very quick, but this time I understand," said François-Poncet.

Galeazzo, standing behind his ornate desk, read him the official words of declaration of war:

"In the name of His Majesty the King of Italy, Emperor of Ethiopia etc..."

François-Poncet got upset and said, "So, it is war."

"Yes."

Galeazzo was in his uniform of lieutenant colonel of the Italian Air Force.

François-Poncet said, "And you, what are you going to do? You are going to drop bombs on Paris?"

"I think so. I am an officer, and I will do my duty."

"Ah! At least try not to get killed. It’s not worth it."

François-Poncet was visibly moved, and said some words that Galeazzo said he did not think he could honorably repeat. Then Galeazzo and François-Poncet separated with a handshake.

"What did he ever tell you?" asked Anne Marie. "I'd be curious to know."

Galeazzo said, "A very interesting thing, but I can't repeat it."

"I bet he told you some insolence. That's why you don't want to repeat it!” she said.

We all laughed, and Galeazzo laughed more loudly than the others.

"He would have been right to tell me some insolence. But he didn't really say anything offensive. He was very moved."

Then he continued narrating how the British had accepted the declaration of war. Sir Percy Lorraine entered, and immediately asked him why he had been asked to come. Galeazzo read him the official formula of the declaration of war.

"In the name of His Majesty... etc..."

Lorraine listened carefully, as if not to miss a single syllable, then asked coldly: "And this is the exact formula of the declaration of war?"

Galeazzo could not hide a moment of surprise: "Why yes, this is the exact formula for the declaration of war."

"Ah!” said Lorraine. "Then may I have a pencil?"

"Yes, certainly," and Galeazzo handed him a pencil and a sheet of paper with the letterhead of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs printed on it.

Lorraine carefully folded the sheet exactly, then tore off the letterhead with the help of a letter opener.

He observed the pencil tip, then said to Galeazzo: "Would you do me the courtesy of dictating to me what you have read?"

"With pleasure," said Galeazzo, deeply amazed. Then he slowly, word for word, dictated the declaration of war. When he was finished, Lorraine, who remained impassive during the process, hunched over the sheet of paper, stood up, shook hands with Galeazzo and started for the door. When he reached the threshold he stopped for a moment, then, without turning around, he went out.

"I want to tell you as well," said Galeazzo, "How Minister Sapuppo learned the news of the German invasion of Denmark. Sapuppo swore by all things Holy the Germans would never be so stupid as to invade Denmark. Virgilio Lilli swore the exact opposite.

“Minister Sapuppo told him, "But no, dear Lilli, why would the Germans invade Denmark?"

“Lilli said, "And why does it matter why? It only matters to know if they will come or if they will not."

"They will not come," declared Sapuppo.

"They will absolutely come," said Lilli.

“Lilli lived at the hotel Britannia. Every morning, regularly, at eight in the morning precisely, an old white-haired waiter, rosy face framed by long experience in proper protocol, in a suit with golden buttons, entered the room bringing a tea tray, bowed, and placed it on a small table near the bed.

“Each morning the waiter said, "Here is your usual, as usual."

“The scene was repeated for twenty days, every morning, at eight precise, and ended with the same sentence: "Here is your usual, as usual."

On the twenty-first day, that morning the old waiter arrived, as usual, punctually at eight, and with usual inflection of voice he bowed and said: "Here is your usual, as usual. And the Germans have come."

Galeazzo finished his story: “Lilli instantly jumped out of bed and telephoned Minister Sapuppo to announce that he was right, the Germans had come to Copenhagen.”

"You forgot something in your stories," said Anne Marie, in her Swedish accent.

Galeazzo looked at Anne Marie with a surprised air, and a little troubled.

"I've not forgotten anything," he said.

"Yeah, you forgot something," said Filippo. "You forgot to tell us that Lorraine, having reached the threshold, turned and said, "You think this war will be easy and short. You are wrong. The war will be very long and very difficult. *Au revoir*."

“Ah! You also knew?" asked Anne Marie.

"How do you know this?" asked Galeazzo, visibly irritated.

"Count de Foxa told me about it, the Spanish Minister in Helsinki. But everyone knows. It’s an Italian secret. That is, no secret at all.”

"I heard it for the first time in Stockholm, Everyone knew it, in Stockholm," said Anne Marie.

Galeazzo tried to smile, as if he didn't know if to be irritated or embarrassed. Everyone looked at him laughing.

Marita exclaimed, “Oh, take it easy, Galeazzo!"

The women laughed and made a graceful game of him. He played along but something sounded fake in his laughing and jokes, something was split inside of him.

"Poncet was right, it's not worth it," said Patricia.

"Oh no, really, it's not worth dying over," said Georgette.

"No-one wants to die," said Patricia.

Galeazzo had darkened in his face; he was irritated and now upset. The conversation, then, turned to affably making jokes about some of his collaborators.

The young women made fun of a certain Minister V. that, returned from South America, had planted his tent at the golf club, to be continuously under the eyes of Galeazzo, hoping not to be lost sight of and forgotten.

"He plays golf even in the antechamber of the Palazzo Chigi," said Cyprienne.

Patricia began to talk about the Minister to Berlin, Dino Alfieri, and all shouted that it was truly a privilege, for Italy, to have an ambassador like Dino Alfieri.

"He's so handsome!" they all exclaimed.

There was told, in those days, throughout Italy, a story invented by some clever spirit: A German Luftwaffe officer had surprised his own wife in bed with the Minister, and struck Alfieri in the face with his swagger stick.

"I pray to Heaven," said Patricia, "that it hasn't scarred him. He’s so handsome!"

Anne Marie asked Galeazzo if it was true, as everyone believed, that he had sent Minister Alfieri to Berlin because he was jealous of him. Everyone laughed gaily but it was obvious Galeazzo was annoyed by the implication.

"Jealous?" He asked. "That is Goebbels speaking, he is jealous of Alfieri, and he would like me to recall him."

"Oh, Galeazzo! Leave him where he is," said Marita. "In Berlin he does so well!"

And everyone burst out laughing.

Then they took talking about Filippo and his Hungarian loves.

"In Budapest," said Filippo, "women don't want to know about me. The Hungarians, they are brunettes, so they go crazy for blondes."

Georgette turned to Galeazzo, and asked why he didn't send a blonde to Budapest.

"Blonde? And who is blonde, in this career?" asked Galeazzo, and he began to count the blondes who were in the foreign ministry.

"Renato Prunas," suggested one.

"Guglielmo Rulli," suggested another.

But Galeazzo, who could not suffer Rulli, never losing the opportunity to denigrate him, furrowed his forehead and said, "No, Rulli, no."

"I'm blonde," said Blasco d'Ayeta.

"Yes, Blasco! Blasco! Blasco! Send Blasco to Budapest!" they all chanted.

"Why not," said Galeazzo.

But Filippo, to whom the joke wasn't funny, well knowing how the promotions and the choice of ministers were accomplished at Palazzo Chigi, turned to Blasco d'Ayeta with a smiling face and told him in a controlled but aggressive tone, "You are always prepared to fill my shoes, aren't you," alluding to the fact that Blasco had already replaced him as Galeazzo's chief assistant.

Then, all of them were protesting because Alberto had not yet been promoted to Councilor, and because Buby had failed to enter the Cabinet, and because Ghigi had been transferred to Athens, when he had been so successful in Bucharest, and why Galeazzo had not decided to appoint Cesarino Minister in Copenhagen instead of Sapuppo.

"He has been there forever and doesn't know what he's doing, in Denmark!" said Patricia.

The story of Sapuppo and Lilli had entertained them all a great deal, and Galeazzo, who laughed with the others, seemed to set aside his recent disturbance about the subject.

From Sapuppo the conversation slid into the war.

Marita said, dragging out the word, "How bo-o-o-oring!"

She protested that her companions complained because at Quirinetta there were no longer any American films, and because in all Rome there was no longer a single drop of whisky or a package of American or English cigarettes, and Patricia said that in this war the only thing that men had to do was to fight if they wanted to and if they had the time to spare.

"I would, but I simply haven't the time," said Marcello del Drago.

And the women were waiting for the arrival of the English and Americans with their victorious regiments of Camel, Lucky Strike, and Gold Flake.

"*A whale of a lot of Camel*," said Marita in her imagined slang of the New Yorker.

And everyone began to speak in imaginary English, with their undefined accents, a mix somewhere between Oxford and that of Harper's Bazaar.

Suddenly from the open window a fly flew in, then another, then ten, then twenty, one hundred, a thousand, and in a few moments a cloud of flies invaded the bar.

It was the time of flies.

Every day, at a certain time, which varied according to the seasons, a buzzing armada of flies assaulted the golf club. Players made their clubs spin around to get rid of the swarm, shook their hands around their faces. The caddies dropped their bags in the grass, waving towels around. The Old Roman Princesses, nées Smith, Brown, Samuel, the solemn dowagers, the faded beauties walking on the fairway fled, waving their hands, and the balls from the silver pommels on their canes whirled.

"The flies!" yelled Marita, jumping up. Everyone laughed, and Marita said, "I will be ridiculous, but I'm terrified of flies!"

"Marita is right, flies bring misfortune," said Filippo.

A burst of laughter greeted the words, and I observed that every year some new and different pestilence struck Rome; one year and an invasion of mice, another year spiders, another year and an invasion of beetles.

"Since the war began, the flies came out," I said.

"The golf club is famous for flies," said Blasco D'Ayeta. "In Montorfano and Ugolino everyone laughs at us."

"There is little to laugh about. If the war goes on for a while, we'll all be eaten by flies." said Marita.

"It's the end we deserve," said Galeazzo, getting up.

And, taking Cyprienne's arm, he started towards the exit door, followed by all the others.

As I passed by he looked at me and seemed to remember something. Leaving Cyprienne's arm, he put his hand on my shoulder, continuing to walk beside me, as if he were pushing me along. We paced up and down in the golf club, finally alone and in silence, then suddenly Galeazzo said to me, as if continuing aloud an annoying thought:

"What did you say one day, talking to me about Edda? I got so angry with you, I wouldn't let you continue. But you were right. My real enemy is Edda. She doesn't realize it, she's not at fault. I don't know, I don't even ask myself, but I feel that Edda, for me, is the danger, that I must beware of as if from an enemy. If one day Edda walked away from me, if there was something else in her life, something serious, I would be lost.

"You know that her father loves her, that he would never do anything against me if he knew he was giving her pain: but he waits only for the right moment. It all depends on Edda. I have tried several times to make her understand how dangerous some of her behaviors are for me. There is perhaps nothing wrong with what she does, I don't know, I don't want to know. But with Edda I cannot speak. She is a tough, strange woman. You never know what to expect from her."

"Sometimes she scares me."

He spoke in a staccato, in that hoarse, slightly off-key voice of his, brushing the flies off his face with a monotonous gesture of one now-pudgy white hand. The flies buzzed around us insistently and angry, and every now and then the soft, faint snap of a driver against a golf ball came from a distance.

"I don't know who makes those stupid rumors about Edda, about her intention to have our marriage annulled to marry I don't know who. Ah, these flies!"

He exclaimed loudly with a furious gesture.

After a moment he added, "All talk. Edda will never do such a thing. But meanwhile her father has begun to prick up his ears. You will see that I will not stay much longer at the Ministry. Do you know what I think? That I will always be Galeazzo Ciano, even if I will no longer be Minister. My moral and political situation will have everything to gain, if Mussolini sends me away. You know how Italians are made: they will forget my mistakes and my wrongs, and see the truth, that I am as much the victim as themselves."

"The *victim*?" I asked.

He said in a rush, "Do you think that the Italian people don't know who is responsible for everything, the only one responsible? That they can't distinguish between me and Mussolini? That they don't know that I opposed the war, that I did everything possible-"

I burst in, incredulous for my friend.

"The Italian people don't want to hear it, and they no longer believe in any of this, or in you. You and the others had to do something in 1940 to prevent this war. To do something, to risk something then, that was the moment to sell your life dearly. Now your skin is worthless, nothing. You like power too much, that's the truth. And the Italians know it."

"Do you think I'm leaving now…"

"It's too late now. The wave is coming. You will all drown with him."

"What should I do then?" he said, with a shrill impatience in his voice. "What is expected of me? That I am thrown away like a used rag when it suits him? That you, Curzio, can't help me and you condemn me to drown with him? I don't want to die."

"To die? 'It is not worth it'," I replied, repeating the words of François Poncet.

"And just like that, it's not worth it," he said. "So then, why die? Italians are good people, they don't want anyone's death."

"You are wrong, the Italians are no longer what they used to be. They will see you die with pleasure, you and him. You, him, and everyone else."

"And what good would our deaths be?" he asked.

"None. They will do no good at all."

I went quiet, exhausted.

Galeazzo was silent. He had gone pale, and his forehead was soft with sweat. He shooed away the flies.

A young girl strode across the lawn at that moment, meeting a group of players returning to the club, swinging their putters in their hands.

"What a nice girl!" said Galeazzo. “Pretty, isn’t she?

"Yes, very beautiful,” I said.

Galeazzo Ciano nudged my ribs with his elbow, smiled and winked.

“You’d like some of that pussy, wouldn’t you?”

EPILOGUE

In July, 1943, Mussolini convened a meeting of his Fascist government; unexpectedly, he was thrust out of power by a resurgent faction that included his own son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano. The new government immediately set about switching sides to the Allies. Italy then split into two regional governments, one Allied and one Axis Fascist. Unfortunately for Galeazzo, the new Allied regime was not at all fond of him, and despite his image of himself, he was forced to flee for his life.

He eventually fell into the hands of the Italian Fascist rump government. After a short trial for treason, Mussolini signed his death warrant. Edda tried desperately to save Galeazzo, revealing she really did love her husband and the father of her children, but was unsuccessful.

To humiliate him, he was tied backwards to a chair and denied the right to defy the guns; at the final moment, *el momente de verdad,* Galeazzo struggled to twist around; and he faced his executioners directly, shouting, '*Viva l'Italia*!'.

On January 11, 1944, Galeazzo Ciano was shot dead by a Fascist firing squad.

Exalted Tantalus faced Death
Despite his consorting with the gods
As did Tithonus though lifted by the winds
And Minos who dared give Jove advice
Hades holds Euphorbus

He journeyed below one time more
To display his old soldier's shield
To prove his service in the Trojan War
He declared Death claims only flesh and bone
And he was of your finest philosophers

All come to a common end
All must walk the path to Death
Some amuse brutal Mars
Fishermen drown in the thirsty sea
Young and old crowd each other
To flock to ever triumphant Proserpina

Horace
Odes 1.28