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PROFESSION: HUSBAND

THE MOST AMUSING NOVEL OF THE YEAR



**HOW TO MARRY A RICH WIDOW
AND LIVE FOR EVER HAPPY.**



MANY AWARDS
AND PRIZES RECEIVED

CHAPTER I



The main square of the village, nestling between the medieval castle, the marble fountain and the old church is swarming with all kinds of people.

There are some, contentedly sitting in front of a bar, sipping their coffee while others are chatting in groups, while still others pause to look in shop windows or simply hurrying by immersed in their daily chores. On the other side of the square is Windmill street, with its usual chaos of cars, pedestrians and other vehicles, of all shapes and sizes; while the old traffic lights, right in the middle, try to maintain a semblance of order.

It is ten in the morning and my village is swamped by the feverish activity of a normal working day.

It is a glorious morning and the sun is literally flooding the streets. The sky of a boundless clear blue resembles an immense crystal dome. Spring has been in the air banishing the gray, rainy Winter days and pervading the air with the scent of flowers and of the countryside.

I am still in my pajamas and smelling of newly-washed sheets. I can't help but look at my fellow-villagers in the square rushing about in all directions, with a certain sense of superiority:

“Pull your fingers out, you slaves. It was an imbecile like yourself who once said that **“work ennobles man”**”.

I let the curtains fall. I stretched my arms and took the paper. Then I lie down on the sofa and have a look at paper.

Before long, the maid will bring me a marvelous cup of coffee, accompanied by brioches, toast, butter and jam, a typical gentle-man's breakfast. Later I shall get dressed and as smart as ever, go for a stroll.

And what for? Nothing ... to make fun of those who are working. In the afternoon, I will have my usual game of tennis, after dinner - bridge and finally ... I will go wandering through the empty streets with my friends until late.

[Have I won the Pools?](#) Am I a millionaire or have I inherited a family fortune? None of these. I'm a man like you. Someone without a penny to his name and who, until the other day, had worked his guts out in a government office. It's just that I have discovered the secret of life, of happiness...of peace.

Betty, the maid, comes in. She is tall, slim ... tasty as ever. She sways her hips coquettishly and puts my breakfast tray on the table. I give her a pat on her wonderful bottom and she, as always, promptly jumps aside with a shriek.

"Oh, marvelous, just like every other morning!"

Betty goes away. I "devour" her amazing bottom with my eyes, as it undulates fantastically under her tight dress. As they say "everything comes to him who waits".



I smile to myself. I have a sip of my wonderful coffee. I am satisfied - but what am I saying? Content, happy... and mine is bliss which comes from within. I pause to have another glance through the windows at the square. I enjoy seeing my fellow villagers bustling about frantically in all directions.

Some are cursing because their son is always kept down at school, some because they have to feed a wife and three or four kids, some are thinking of their political career or of making a pile of money.

You decadent old society! You have only three ideals left: money, sex, and power. And you wear yourself out, panting after them. Life goes on peacefully, but you don't even see it. You only notice it when it is over, when they carry you in your coffin to one of those horrible monuments of death which are called cemeteries.

Not even then you are allowed to enjoy the beauty of a flower-covered meadow, the miracle of a field of ripe corn swaying in the wind, from a grave under a tree. Instead you are buried there among the corpses piled one on top of the other in a macabre necropolis of graves; between the newly-buried accountant and the solicitor who smelt like a corpse for ten years!

I have a bite of my brioche; it's oven-fresh. As well as having a fantastic bottom, Betty has the knack of getting hold of the best brioches in the village.

I catch sight of D., the lawyer, who is crossing the square. Short and plump, as well as a bit hunch-backed, he is bowling at his assistant. He must be in another of his tempers. Having an imbecile like that around, his liver must be in a right mess!

Why doesn't he fire him? Because you know who his daughter, with so many millions of men to choose from, has gone and fallen in love with?

With a handsome hunk, tall, blond, but inept and as thick as two short planks. And now it's up to him to introduce the "freshman" into the work environment, and they say the oaf has even got one over him. The lawyer will curse, shout, go red in the face till he needs a whole bottle of his heart-pills, but in the end he'll have to let them marry and take them in - him, wife, and baby-on-the-way.

And so, old lawyer D., at Sixty-five you must plough on when you would rather retire to get on with your historic studies, your favorite hobby.

You are loaded, but what good does it do you?

Look at me, how happy I am! What tranquillity! What peace! And yet I haven't a cent! How did I do it?

I used to be like you too, any insignificant clerk. I used to get up at 6.30 every morning and go to work half-asleep, in danger of walking into a lamp-post on my way to the office. Always caught in the battle between the boss and the clients, who, could never agree about anything! Always among stacks of papers ruining my liver so that others could make a career for themselves.



Home sweet home

At home It was even worse. The minute I put my foot inside the door, a heap of trouble would fall on to my shoulders. The washing-machine was broken, my mother in law was coming to see us (she'll never die - she is everlasting, like the economic crisis!), the caretaker wanted to see us about repairs to our block of flats, the H.P. payments for the new furniture were due and we didn't have any money ... I very nearly felt like going straight to the office again.

And then the miracle happened: my wife died!

Nobody killed her, she died of her own will, naturally.

"Antony" - I said to myself - "this is a sign of destiny. The good Lord wanted to speak to

you, wanted to give you a sign. You must not let this opportunity go. You mustn't let yourself be trapped in a life of privation and hardship. Do you remember Pirandello's Mattia Pascal? You must make yourself a note and engrave it well and truly on your mind; you are not Mattia Pascal!".

And so, after three months of dutiful mourning, I turned up neat and tidy at "The Cosy Cottage", one of the more reputable marriage-bureau.

But what? - I hear you to protest – You had just said that you would not fall into any other traps?

- Please, let me go on: “experience is the master of life”.

The woman slowly turned the pages of her copious catalogue. The youngest, most beautiful, most eligible girls in the area! Italian, English, Brazilian, Russian, Polish etc. and some of them were really young - seventeen, twenty-year-old, top quality stuff! But at each photograph, I shook my head painstakingly.

“I understand” - the woman said - “You are interested in a virgin, a girl who's never had a boy-friend.”

And she showed me the photo of a plump girl, with a boyish hair-cut and a dumb expression. Too right that she was a virgin. God, who on earth would dare get into bed with that?!

I shook my head in refusal once again.

“So you would like Someone very wealthy, would you?”

“Not too rich...” - I protested feebly.

I gave her a fairly precise outline of the woman I wanted to marry. I would prefer a widow in her mid-thirties, a bit on the ugly side, plump, without a strong personality; well-off rather than rich, and above all a country-girl.



Why a country girl? Because city-girls create more problems than they are worth.

No, better still, the ideal choice would be a provincial woman, maybe a bit tight-fisted, and free of all vices. One of those bourgeois peasants who are to be found vegetating in almost every town and who neglected by men, secretly dream of a nice young man to get their claws into.

None of those civilized emancipated or feminist type, Heaven help us!

So much the better if she's a bit of a bigot who holds fidelity dear. I'm not a jealous type, but unfaithful women give rise to an endless succession of problems, and I was wanting to live the rest of my years in peace.

And so the choice fell on her: Maria Carmela. A middle-aged lass, plumpish, insignificant, faded without ever having been a beauty. The young men of the village, Justifiably so, had totally neglected her, and not even the fact that she was a “flower of virtue” had managed to shake them from their resolve.

She had only an old mother, still active and full of life, with whom she ran a chemist's shop in the center of the village.

Her economic situation was therefore ideal: not too rich, but rich enough to live a trouble-free existence.

Just perfect: two lonely old women, who behind their outer shell of propriety and reserve felt a great thirst for affection.

How did I manage to work that out? Well, in one of the photos they put in front of me, which showed the two Women in their garden, I could see two or three horrible cats.



Reality lived up to expectation. When I met her and her mother in their old hill-top village, they were just as I had pictured them. A bit short, plump, with identical round bespectacled face, identical features, the only difference being that the mother had aged a little. I really couldn't say which one was the more ugly!

The place, on the other hand, was marvelous.

What peace! What silence, so much green and such a clear sky!

There was an enchanting view from the terrace of their elegant and spacious house. The whole valley with its vineyards, olive-grove and fields of all shapes and sizes stretched out green and luxuriant below us. So much space and what a light! A bit better than the city ... where your eyes always hit the block opposite!

And what fresh clear air! There was a gentle breeze coming from the country... enough to revive the dead!

At long last, far from the fog, the traffic, the chaos, perverse industrial civilization!

"You old rogue" - I said to myself - "It's time you laid down your roots like the trees. Do you see those two old dears? You must "work" on them properly ... Dig out your old "how to be a playboy" handbook, revise the old art of seduction so widely practiced in your youth ... but you mustn't let this opportunity slip through your fingers ...

It was just as I had imagined. Behind the "proud austere" facade, there was nothing more than two "little girls" so much in need of affection. It was no problem getting into their two hearts. Yes two, because I was fully aware that I had to win over both of them; in fact, old woman number one (that is the mother) was more important than old woman number two (I am numbering them so it's easy to distinguish them).

After I had skillfully worked on them a few weeks with my refined art, they were mad about me. They loaded me with presents, they showered their attention on me and were full of kindnesses. And the meals they cooked for me!

All good stuff, natural stuff which they bought directly from the peasants, much better than those "tomatoes" I used to buy in the city which seemed to have come off the assembly line of some plastic industry. Whenever I went to see them, I fasted for two days before, so that I could make the most of my "fill-up".

"What a good man!" is all they could say as they bustled around me while they prepared cakes and delicacies for me, twittering like two nightingales. And I was a good man simply because I hadn't laid an "erotic" finger on old woman number two!

After three or four months, they were both so head-over-heels that their eyes sparkled. They didn't do anything but talk of marriage. I, feigning indifference, carefully let the subject drop almost as though the idea didn't really interest me. So much so that when in the end I got married in the main square, feted by the whole village, both of them were beside themselves with joy.



I honestly didn't know which was the happier of the two – whether: the old woman number two, who was getting married, or number one who was finally putting on the market an "item" which had remained unsold for too long?

I was sad to leave my town (or at least that's what I said, whereas I was really jumping for joy at the thought of leaving that tiny flat on which the sun managed to shine once or twice a year coinciding with God knows what astral conjunction) and I went to live in that

little village full of light and sun. Of course, I also had to leave my job, "of which I was so fond", because the two poor ladies insisted so much that I just couldn't refuse.

"Come and stay with us; don't worry, you can work in the chemist's shop with us. There's enough for everyone....".

And so it came to pass that my new profession as "husband" began. Before long I had forgotten the grayness of my poky little flat, the frugal cafeteria meals, the thousand and one problems of a life of hardships and loneliness. Here, I am served at the table like a king, I go to the best tailor in town and I have a barber who comes and shaves me at home every morning.

Everybody, from the mayor to the milkman, knows me, they all call me "Mr. Chemist", they all love and respect me.

Even the life of the two old ladies has changed. Since I've been around, they've got much livelier, sprightly even ... They are looking after themselves much more and really seem rejuvenated.

A ray of light has entered in to their gray and monotonous life once full of frustration and void of all affection, and has become a reason for existence, and they are doing their utmost to communicate their joy to me. They pet me, they cosset me, they spoil me with the most elaborate and succulent dinners. One of these days I'll find them dancing on a sunbeam like two little birds.

Basically I see myself as a missionary. What sort of a life did these two poor women have before they met me? A gray nothingness ...

My wife, faded and embittered, had become a fixture in the chemist's shop, just like the counter or the cupboard full of beauty-creams. A purposeless, loveless, sunless life.

Yes, I know, I'm a good sort deep down. I have promised the rest of my life to those poor, lonely women. To be fair, however, in return I have the odd thing in my favor, such as not having to work.

Yes, that's right, not having to work! Because since I found out that staying in the Chemist's was lethal for "my delicate nervous system", they have taken care to free me from such a burden. A clientele, my dear, just too difficult to deal with someone like me who gets so easily agitated.



Naturally I promised to help them with the domestic chores. But I ran into difficulties

there too before very long. After smashing I don't know how many dinner services, two washing-machines and burning my wife's best dresses with the iron, it was thought wise to take on a maid.

All this upset me deeply, causing my already exhausted nervous system to undergo further deterioration. So the two poor women, in order not to finish me off altogether, thought that I should be relieved of any type of work "for a while".

"Don't worry, we'll look after the chemist's shop. If the need arises we'll get another shop assistant, but you have to take it easy. Did you hear what the doctor said? You're worn out, you mustn't do anything for a while ..."

And so I've been taking it easy for the last four years, or rather practicing the noble profession of "husband".

How do I spend my days? It's easily said. I get up at about 10.30, give my orders to the maid, have breakfast and go for a stroll. I come home for lunch, have an afternoon nap to get my strength back, and then I go and play tennis. I normally round off the day playing cards with my friends, or driving around aimlessly in my car.

How do I help in the running of the **chemist's**? Let's say that I am rather gifted at public relations. I publicize my wife's business more than ten evenings of advertisements on the local TV. I send all my friends (and there are a fair number of them, I might add!) to the two old dears when they ask me what they should do for their various complaints.



As far as my fellow villagers are concerned I am still the chemist and the fact that I don't have a degree and have never set foot in a clinic is of no account whatsoever. Obviously the fact that I sleep with my wife is enough to transmit her knowledge to me.

Naturally the two good women put things right if I confuse the name of an antibiotic with that of a laxative by finding out all the details of the patient's complaint. They are well aware that I am little suited to any kind of work, and they sincerely appreciate "my efforts" to contribute to the family budget.

I finish my breakfast, get up and go into the bedroom. I find my laundry, spotlessly clean on the bed. I pick up my shirt and smell it; it smells fresh and starched. I unfold it and begin to put it on.

Thanks be to God, so far no children have appeared on the scene. And I don't want any. To tell the truth the danger that they will turn me into a nanny is always lurking round the corner. Every month I get a bit worried, but luckily my wife's periods always come so regularly that I think they'll still keep coming even after the menopause.

I look at myself in the mirror and my figure, still youthful and bewitching appears, full-length before me.

How nice it is to be a husband by profession! No problems, no obligations, no worries, I have only one duty: to satisfy my wife, once a week, on Saturdays.

Hasn't she lost her shape a bit, isn't she on the plump side, a bit ugly? As long as you don't turn the light on ...

In any case, every job has its drawbacks. And believe me, in mine they are far fewer than the advantages. I don't have to get up early in the morning or catch a bus or train (my wife is near at hand), I have a very reduced work-schedule (half an hour on Saturdays) and so on.

When I walk through the streets and see my fellow-villagers worrying over their daily troubles, I feel sorry for them. None of that for me! No problems, no worries, no dashing about; I hate it!

I'll live till I'm a hundred, and I certainly won't die of a heart-attack. Does leisure make you soft, and make you put on weight? Is it the root of all vices? Not a bit of it.

That's just an old wife's tale spread about by people who have to work out of necessity. It all boils down to getting yourself organized and finding something to keep yourself occupied. You have to eat little and well, do a few hours' exercise or sport, have some artistic hobbies and have to above all have a good bunch of lively friends.

I'm telling you - nobody's ever died from sweet doing-nothing. It's work that makes a man ugly especially when there's too much of it, therefore turning him into an animal.

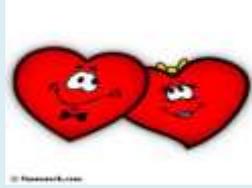
Power, money, family - leave them for others to worry about. What good does it do you to become senator, or President of the Republic if you don't have any free afternoons?

Believe me, you have to make more sacrifices than it's worth. You'll gradually come to realize that it forces you to give up everything: recreation, friendships, the cinema... even sex. Money?

Just get as much as you need and the rest can go to the devil. What's the point of travelling in a Rolls-Royce, living in the best hotels, having the most beautiful women if you never even have the time to enjoy them?

I don't know a single millionaire who works less than twelve or thirteen hours a day and who isn't permanently busy and worried. Wives get left increasingly alone, kids left to their own devices, sometimes ending up hooked on drugs ... terrible scenes, divorces, dramas.

Money, believe you me, is always a problem whether you have too much or too little of it.



Love? Yes, It's a wonderful thing. But beware!

In the majority of cases it gets you into that infernal trap called marriage. When you have three or four brats to bring up you'll be harnessed tighter than the horses that pull the Russian troikas in the snow. Believe me, rearing brats Is a hard, ungrateful task. After Twenty, twenty-five years of self-sacrifice in order to bring them up, with no more than a "goodbye" they'll be off.

And that's if you're lucky, because they could fall into bad company and make you curse what little life is left to you. And don't kid yourself; don't say "it'll never happen to me."

I know thousands of parents who thought the very same thing, and their children are drug-addicts, delinquents, hooligans when they're not actually in jail, that is. And in return, What do they give you? Just a bit of affection. And meanwhile you realize that you've grown old bringing them up.

But believe me, **nobody ever died for want of affection.** And then, you've got your friends, your relations, your brothers' children who can give you all the affection you want without making you curse on their account. Get yourself a dog, a cat. When you get tired of it you can get rid of it with a simple boot up the backside.

No, you must believe me, life is beautiful. It's a wonderful thing but by far the majority of us aren't even aware of it. One way or another, we always find come reason for cursing it.

Some go chasing after money, come after sports cars, come ruin themselves betting on horses, gambling or taking drugs ... don't worry: we always find some noose to put round our necks.

As a result, we have millions of neurotic people with complexes, psychopaths, people in distress, nutters, suicide or maniacs...

Believe me, **happiness does not exist;** at most there are some moment of happiness. Don't spend your life pursuing it. Peace exists, tranquillity.

Look at me - I don't exude joy from all my pores, but I don't have worries, pain or distress ... I am as calm as the boundless sky, the only dome at Monterupoli (the name of my small town).

This, believe me, is real happiness.

CHAPTER II



It's eleven; smart, sweet-smelling in my double-breasted striped suit, a carnation in my button-hole, I descend among the mere mortals. With a blissful smile on my face, one hand in my pocket and the air of an American boss walking among his employees checking that everything is in order.

A light breeze smelling of trees, flowers, and broom rises from the country. I breathe in deeply, filling my lungs with oxygen, health, life! When did I ever breathe such healthy air in the city? When did I ever see a sun that wasn't just a narrow strip shining between the blocks of flats? When did I ever enjoy this peace, these periods of silence, this life which goes by slowly, unhurried and trouble-free?

Some folk say hello as we pass each other, some exchange a joke with me. Everybody looks at me with a touch of envy, with certain smiles of complicity. It's as though I can read in their eyes:

"Lucky you, Mr. Chemist. You don't have to work your guts out like we do. Keep going!"

And I get pleasure from these looks; they gratify my intelligence and make me feel like a

King!

I'm standing on a parapet which looks on to Victoria Square.

From here, being in the valley, I can see the whole summit of Mount Leprino on which Monterupoli is almost entirely built.

There it is, my village, with its narrow cobbled streets between the houses perched on the edge of the clay ravines, its red roofs stacked on top of each other as if they were the gigantic pieces of a set of enormous dominoes; with its twenty thousand inhabitants (or souls as the curate calls them) as active and frantic as the components of a huge ant-hill.

It's a very "particular" place, a village which I would say had been totally made up by a hack writer if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes and touched it with my own hands.

So many times have I tried to imagine what you could see if you could take off those roofs, lift off the tiles and look into the poor houses of the peasants, tradesmen and glorified middle-classes. How many dramas, how many problems, incidents and arguments!

And each one different from the last! In one family they are squabbling because they never have enough money, in another one of the kids is getting up to all sorts of mischief, in some they are celebrating a happy event, in another they are mourning some misfortune. In one house there is joy because of a birth, while only a few doors further down there is the deep silence of a funeral wake.

In how many is there peace and love?

Only a few, very few. I'm afraid even to count them up.

I, of course, know all the ins and outs of these houses, these alleys, these crags. I've been here five years, but it seems like fifty. Sometimes, I even think I was born here in the middle of the land like a malignant shrub. No, I don't read the paper every day. There isn't even one paper at Monterupoli. Here there are no radios, no news-letters, no local editions.



The only thing that exists here is the "wire-less telephone" which invisibly connects the whole village.

"So it's true that the lawyer's wife has an understanding with Gino the agent," and then the old, obese neighbor tells her trusted friend making her 'cross her heart and hope to die' that she'll keep the secret.

This friend then tells another bosom friend, on the solemn promise that she won't tell anyone. And so the news travels by word of mouth through the whole village in a flash. Sometimes I think the speed even beats a telegram.

All you need is a "terminal" (some close friend) and you are connected to the whole "electronic apparatus". It's a kind of "tom-tom" like the American Indians use. You can't even manage to finish a fart before the echo resounds from the other side of the village. And then the arguments! What comments, what criticism! When I see some critic on the TV doing an interview on a film or a newly-published book, I feel like laughing. At Monterupoli he would only be a poor amateur.

They laugh about so-and-so because his wife has left him and run off with somebody else, about Caio whose daughter has got something going with a good-for-nothing, and yet they don't see their own faults which are bigger than a block of flats.

Then, of course, there are those who have made a profession of this noble art, like Aunt Teresa and Aunt Eleonora. They are two spinsters who "print" their "gossip-rag" in hushed tones at all hours of the day in their poky little shop (they have a haberdashery). All the goings-on in the village are reported carefully over the sale of a pair of socks or a box of buttons, calmly and precisely, never hurrying to send the latest edition "to press". Then everything is filed carefully, catalogued according to subject-matter. They know the history of all the scandals enacted at Monterupoli over the past three or four generations.

This old village with its whitewashed walls, its peasant puritanical origins seems to be the realm of honesty, the integrity of customs, the last oasis of innocence in our corrupt modern civilization. But this is an impression which soon vanishes.

If a tourist arrives wearing a very short skirt or a low-cut blouse which reveals two breasts spilling out, they talk for a whole month about the decline of moral standards. If someone inadvertently says the word "prick" he is a sex-maniac; if you let it get round that you have enemas you are a puff, when the word leg is uttered they hasten to specify whether it belongs to a table or a chicken.



Go and uncover those **roofs** then, go and spy on them in bed or in the loo. There enough goes or to make "l'Histoire d'O" look like a kid's comic. There's the florist who married Miss Nannina and got her spinster sister as a free gift (just like the drums of detergent you buy - buy one and get one free), and is now living with both of them in a sinful "ménage à trois".

Mrs. Jolanda, a widow with lots of kids, every now and again helps the family budget by selling off one of her children to some sterile couple. Mr. Paulino, an old peasant who lives on an isolated farm a few kilometers from the village, has substituted his much-mourned deceased wife with his young cow "for certain needs".

Obviously these are all rumors; not a single bit of it is official. Appearances are always kept up wonderfully in questions of protocol by those acrobats of my fellow-villagers.

Father Antonio, the parish priest, gives sermons against pornography which is on the increase, against permissiveness which is atheistic and not "God-Fearing", sermons fit to extract a "mea culpa" from the very pews of the Church. And then it is secretly discovered that our village is at the top of the national ratings in the sale of dirty magazines (they must go and buy them at night because I've never seen anybody ask for one at the newsagent's).

It has been discovered that in the evening cars queue up along Mazzini Avenue (the county road which leads to the neighboring town) to take on board the most beautiful prostitutes. It has come to light that every so often there arrive very discreet parcels with inflatable dummies, big rubber phalluses and all sorts of creams.

The porno-films transmitted late at night on the local TV channels have higher audience-ratings than the news. And then the stories of cuckoldry aren't to be counted.

Sometimes the copulations (or the couplings as I call them) are so unforeseeable, so interwoven, entangled that one of those days it's going to happen that some husband will end up in bed with his own wife by mistake.

But despite its hypocrisy, its provincialism, Monterupoli is the best place in the world. Its sun, its sky and its wine are able to make you forget the greatest troubles of this earth. Despite all the cuckolding, the misunderstandings, the enmities, everybody knows everybody else here ... and loves them.

Loneliness is non-existent and we are in last place in the world list of the number of suicides. Here, whether you like it or not, you must have social relations; they virtually impose themselves on you. You may be bashful, shy, exceptionally reserved, but here everyone shouts out to you and treats you like an old friend. When they've known you for just a couple of hours already they are telling you all their troubles and the miserable story of their life.

If they see you looking sad or worried they all take great pains to say a good word to you. If you are in difficulty they will do their very best to help you, and they are willing to share what little they have. You feel human solidarity like you feel it in no other place in the world.



You're getting on, and still without a wife? All of them immediately begin to hunt. And you can rest assured that they'll find you one- she may be old, one-eyed or have a wooden leg - but they'll find you one. Here it is inconceivable that a man of a certain age should be wife-less.

You can emanate joy from all of your pores, go hopping along the road, but if you aren't "settled-down" (that is, married) you always remain an unhappy wretch in their eyes. To their peasant mentality, a wife is a necessary "commodity", like the fridge, the washing-machine or the television.

If you run out of gas or wine half-way through your dinner, all you have to do is knock on the wall with a broom-handle. Whoever your neighbor is he won't deny you his help.

It may well be an old, decrepit, backward, provincial place, but here wisdom isn't learned from books, nor is it subject to fashion, but rather it is inside everyone, part of a tradition going back at least a thousand years. All it takes is a guitar, a little wine and a happy gathering under an arbor to make you forget troubles and cares. You pass your unhurried life amongst the chatter in a doorway or a game of pontoon at the old grimy-walled local.

It may well be a place without lifts, computers and the underground, but it's the sweetest, calmest place in the world. There may be no classy cinemas, fringe theatres or cabarets, but you don't have to curse your soul to find a parking-place in the center. Traffic, smog, traffic-lights are virtually non-existent here. There's none of that noise, that chaos that you find in the streets of the big cities where you have to shout to make yourself heard.

Delinquency is reduced to sporadic cases of theft or brawling, and drug-addicts, vandals, and maniacs are only "something" you hear about on the television or read about in the papers. You can linger quite happily on the streets until late at night without worrying about nasty encounters or about getting blown up by some terrorist. The last popular demonstration goes back to fifty years ago, at the time of the occupation of the land.

Slot-machines, fair-grounds and the amusements of the big world don't exist here, yet here the cases of insanity in the last decade can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

I leave Victoria Square and make my way to "Tony' s Bar" in Via Nazionale. Gennarino, the barman, is waiting for me with the best crushed water-ices in the world.

When he sees me he comes up to me ceremoniously and smiling. He dusts my chair

enough to wear it away; over and over again, he wipes the table with a damp cloth and, wishing me I don't know how many things, he goes off to get me my ice. He comes back with a gleaming new tray on which there is a big glass with a lemon water-ice. He points out the new tray to me:

"For you, Mr. Chemist, only for you"

I make as though to pay; he wards me off. He'll send the bill to the chemist's all in good time. It really is true: Monterupoli is the best place in the world.

I begin to fish out the tiny pieces of ice with the long spoon.

How nice it is to leave the worries of life to others! Not to give a damn about anything or anybody! To have no problems, to live just like an animal that is being fattened up.

You will perhaps find it immoral, perhaps you'll say that life is beautiful precisely because it is a struggle, because there are sacrifices to be made, satisfaction gained from hard work, and so on.

It's all the fault of that rubbish which the priests put into your heads, when you were young. I am always saying this, that those priests have drummed those things so soundly into your heads by talking and talking that now you don't even realize they are there. It's a bit like advertising - it says it again and again - you think you're not listening to it but meanwhile it's brainwashed you.

"But," you'll object "we never had anything to do with priests!"

You've had it just the same! That lot make sure that their morals reach you via the people around you, certain news-papers, social ethics.

If they didn't preach (and in this respect they have employers and politicians as the accomplices) that a life without sacrifice, without struggles, without work, is meaningless who would push us to slave like we do? Who would persuade us to raise kids to lend a hand in industry and to the nation? To pull our fingers out all through life so that we just about manage to put aside enough money to cover our funerals?

Just you listen to me: you live perfectly well without making sacrifices.

"But what about a career?" - you'll object - "Social position, money?"

To hell with all that! They were invented to make you work like dogs! Think only of enjoying yourselves, enjoying life ... get away from your troubles, your problems... your worries.

Allow yourselves a day in the country, an afternoon in the sun, or listen to a record in peace and quiet. Grasp the fleeting moment; don't you see that tomorrow is already today and that life is passing by quickly?!

I sink my spoon into the water-ice once again; I savor another little bit. Delicious!

How nice it is to be here enjoying this ice. To stand at the window watching life pass by. "Come on, my fellow citizens, get a move on! Faster! We must increase our steel

output, we must improve last year's gross national product.."

That man going past now is Father Antonio, the village's old parish priest. He's rather bent, bespectacled, and is wearing a worn black tunic, the same one he's worn for years. In his hand he is carrying a little breviary from which he mutters to himself as he walks along. Fifteen years or so ago, when he was still young and attractive, he was the protagonist of an amazing story which I will now tell you.



At that time he looked after the church at the top of the village, which is dedicated to Saint Alfonso, the patron saint. In the same building, on a side-altar, was the statue of another saint who was fairly-well revered in the village, Saint Pasquale. Saint Pasquale who had been put there after the Second World War because he had had his chapel destroyed by bombs, had then been forgotten out of laziness and also because they didn't know where to put him.

This "living together" generated a sort of saint war, without doubt worthy of being recorded in the annuals of the church.

In fact one night the parish priest heard Saint Pasquale complaining about his only slightly honorable life on earth. Not only had he been put in the Third Division of Saints when the church calendar was revised, he was also little loved by the faithful who preferred the more famous St. Alfonso, and in addition he had been without a place of his own to live since the war.

"I haven't got the tiniest corner even in the chapel!" - he had complained tearfully that night to St. Alfonso - "I am reduced to begging hospitality as I was the last of the tramps. Any day I could find myself out on my ear ... forced to sleep under a bridge ... " - And down came the tears, leaving no hope that he could be calmed.

St. Alfonso's words of comfort were of no use at all: "This is your house too. Have no fear, the church is big enough for both of us; in fact I'd feel rather lonely without you. It's true people do prefer to pray to me; that's only because you aren't very well known. But with 'a bit of publicity' on TV ..."

Tears rolled down the poor parish priest's cheeks when he recounted St. Pasquale's heart-rending lament from the pulpit to the congregation, gathered together to celebrate Mass.

"We must give St. Pasquale a home too" - boomed Father Antonio, excited and moved

by his own words - "Even the birds have a home, only St Pasquale ..."

As with all speeches made by priests it ended with the taking of the collection.

In fact it was decided that St. Pasquale should make the round of the houses in the village, staying a short while in each one of them.

"Do you mean everybody should put him up for a night?" asked St. Alfonso.

"No! Because that way poor St. Pasquale would be homeless just the same and he could lament in Paradise that he was the only nomad saint on earth. If instead each believer made a generous offering (absolutely voluntary) to the unfortunate saint when they put him up, he would in the end have enough money to set up house by himself."

The people were very sympathetic about the affairs of the unfortunate saint, especially because it was those times when very few houses were to be found. The offerings showered down and the old bigots at times came to blows contending for the "privilege" of being next in line to put up this wretch without a roof over his head.

After about three months he made his return to the church, celebrated by an immense crowd and by festive explosions of fireworks. His collection-bags were so full of money that he could have built himself a palace, let alone a house! But the parish priest said that there wasn't that much after all, and the most you could do with that money would be to repair St. Teresa's chapel on the outskirts of the village.

So in the end, the young saint (she was little revered in the area, without doubt the heritage of some foreign domination) was evicted, and the repairs were begun. It didn't occur to anybody that in finding a home for one down-and-out they were turning somebody out on to the streets, a woman at that, and a pretty one.

After St. Theresa's had a good whitewashing, a few frames repaired, and its rusty old gate changed, St. Pasquale was installed there to the applause of an exultant crowd.

A few years later a beautiful villa built Spanish style appeared on the hill-side.

Some malicious tongues said it belonged to the mistress of that "holy man" Father Antonio who, poor thing, had never even touched one of a woman's hairs.

THE POET. Up there on top of the hill you can see it from here, there is another house. It totters on the rock and looks as if it's going to plunge down any moment into the ravine. Sirenetti the poet lives there, that great bard and misunderstood genius of Monterupoli.

Ah, didn't you know?

his door which says:

"Keep away, genius at work!"

When he discovers it he'll go livid with rage and we'll hear him curse his 'contemporaries' all the way down here.

That man who is waving heartily to me is **Mr Calogero**. Walking ahead of him is his young cow, Estherite. He is smiling at me, but his round face darkened by the field sun is red because of a serious fit of temper he must have had a few moments ago. Without doubt he is on his way back from the stud farm, where he can't have had much success.

The story of this peasant and his cow is rather particular. Mr Calogero reared the last-born calf of his old and much-mourned cow Philomena hoping to substitute the mother. But this heifer, though she had been of a marrying age for some time, didn't want to know.

Sexual Immaturity, inhibition? Frigidity pure and simple? Whenever young Estherite showed some sign of a need of affection, I don't know, if she stroked against the other cows, for example, or rubbed against a tree, or if she swung her hips a little too much when she walked, Mr Calogero rushed her off to the bull. But there nothing doing! The virgin Estherite wouldn't let the majestic bull near her, not even to touch her gently with a hoof. She might have been hoping to be assumed into Heaven as the bovine Immaculate Conception.

But Mr Calogero didn't give a damn about the supposed moral virtues of the cow. He wanted baby calves, and soon, for goodness' sake!

Last time it really was the last straw!

Caught rubbing up against the old she-ass. Estherite had been taken at top speed to the stud farm. Mr Calogero was convinced that this time it would work. But this time, too, the marriage drew blank and in addition made the bull fly into a rage because of the burning frustration it had caused him.

You could hear Mr Calogero's burly voice all the way up the road as he swore at the young cow.

"Filthy pig, you liked your friend the she-ass! I'll give you your she-ass!" - And he gave her a mighty kick, at which time the animal jerked forward.

"you have to get together with animals like yourself! Understand?" another kick.

"Next time I catch you rubbing yourself up against that lesbian friend of yours, you'll get what's coming to you, understood? I don't want any lesbians in my family - not even cows, understood?"

I can't stop smiling. The only thing that surprises me is the word "lesbian" on the lips of Mr Calogero. Without a doubt he's heard it on the television.

That little old man, tall lean and white-haired, who is walking close to the wall, is Gino the shooter. He's not really called that, but it is a nickname he has had since time immemorial, and nobody remembers his real name.

Here at Monterupoli they have the habit of allotting everybody a nickname, as you have already had several opportunities to see. The only exceptions to this rule are the strangers and the people who are considered to be of a higher social class, who are often called by the name of their profession. For example, I am known to everybody as the Chemist, and hardly anybody calls me by my real name and surname.

A long time ago an old friend of mine from the city came to see me, and he stopped in the square to ask for information, as he didn't know my address. He said my name hundreds of times, he tried to describe me, to imitate the way I walked, and to say everything he knew about me (including things he shouldn't have said). No use, nobody knew. Meanwhile, a small crowd had gathered round him.

"You must know!" - He, exclaimed at a certain point, absolutely fed up - "The person who married the chemist!"

"Oh, the chemist!" - Shouted my fellow villagers almost in chorus, identifying me at once.

This custom of giving everybody nicknames is not a sign of malice, but rather the indication of the innate sense of humor of these people. These folk, unlike those you find in the city, don't seem to take life too seriously, and they don't worry themselves too much about things.

Getting back to Gino the shooter: everybody calls him that, and he doesn't bother to correct them. For some time now he has been at the center of all the gossip in the whole village, and the very walls are laughing at him because of his mania.

At sixty-five he has suddenly become extremely jealous of his wife. To hear him talk of his suspicions, to see him furtively keeping an eye on his front door, you would think he was married to a very beautiful, still attractive woman.

There she is, "the beauty", in her doorway. She is old, obese, her dark face is wrinkled all over, she walks slowly, and her body is shapeless and tired. Is it possible that such a harpy could cuckold her husband?

To Gino the shooter it is perfectly possible, and he is prepared to prove it to you. All stories that his sick imagination has completely invented and transformed to its liking. When he sees his wife go out he follows her secretly through the village streets, taking all the necessary precautions as suggested in the "perfect detective" handbook.

The other day he insisted - he said he had no choice - on using his rifle on a lad belonging to the village who, on seeing the legs of Gino's wife hanging out the washing, had looked up as he walked beneath her balcony. The people had run up to hold him back trying to

convince him that the boy's reaction had been involuntary and that, in any case, the boy couldn't have gone beyond her knee (with his eyes, of course). But it was all to no avail.

The way Gino saw it, the "Fox" was trying to cuckold him, and he was going to fill the seducer full of bullets "as sure as he was standing there!"

The villagers had to give him a glass of water in which they had secretly dissolved a powerful tranquilizer.

Now Gino the shooter has left his house to do some shopping, but you can bet your boots he's put his grandson "on guard".

Ah, there are Ric and Gianco waving. They are the two playboys of the village. They come to my table to exchange a few words. Without doubt they are coming to tell me about their "latest slaughter of women's hearts". I don't know what it is about me, maybe I inspire trust but I compete relentlessly with the parish priest as confessor. Everybody here confides their secrets to me. Maybe they consider me unbiased, a kind of "neutral observer" dropped into Monterupoli to listen to their stories.

The two lads, tall, handsome, dressed according to the latest fashion, with dark glasses and men-of-the-world ways sit down at my table, and I order two beers.

Their real names are Sandro and Gianni but they are called Ric and Gianco because they are perpetually woman-hunting. The girls of the village run away from them, like the devil from holy water. They know that they are not the marrying types, nor a good match for any of them. The day when one of the girls turns up at home hand in hand with one or the other of the two, she is bound to get her head kicked in.

The women are wise to them by now; they know that even if they managed to hook them, they would be off chasing skirts after a few months of marriage. The playboys are perfectly aware of this and look for "foreign girls", that is the girls from the nearby villages.

They have a one-track mind: sex. Making love all the time everywhere. They have no other aims or ideas in their heads. I tried asking them once what they would have done if God the Father hadn't created women.

They replied, smiling idiotically, that thanks be to God, they did exist and "didn't look as if they were going to stop existing".

Of course they don't really get very far. Apart from some young girls or some summer tourists they make love more in their minds than in actual fact. If you ask them, they have had it off with half the town and they are getting ready to have it off with the other half. If you remind them of certain clear cases of victims who have escaped their charm, they cut you short, saying that they were bitches who weren't worth making love to.

They tear about the village at all hours on their big done up motorbikes which make a terrible racket. For this reason they are the bugbear of Mr Ciccio, the policeman, who often seizes these centaurs. They go around on foot for a couple of days, then, by doing certain

acts of penitence, such as would frighten a nun in closed orders, they manage to move the police-sergeant and they get their bikes back, getting off with a fine.

I ask them how they are doing with women.

"Full up," one answers on behalf of both of them, "Mr. Chemist, we've discovered a depot of women. Two thousand young fillies, including the caretakers! A girls' technical college for fifteen-year-olds upwards - what women!"

"But will you manage to touch a foot of one of these two thousand?" I tease them.

"Are you joking, Mr. Chemist? Rest assured that one by one we'll have all two thousand of them. The day before yesterday I picked up one who was a real bomb! Blonde, wonderful body, pointed bosom, so tall she looked like a horse."

"And what did you say to her?"

"I said 'Hey, Baby! I've got a BMW with reclining seats...'"

"But didn't she notice that you don't have a BMW?"

"This is where the technique, the art, comes in. I tell her that it's at the mechanic's. I tell you this BMW is always at the mechanic's."

"And, do they fall for it?"

"If they don't believe me, I take them to Tony the panel - beater, who is a friend of ours. I show them the first BMW I see there being repaired and I say: 'It's mine'."

Then I start shouting at Tony that he's had my car there for a month now and that it's time he repaired it, and so on ... of course Tony plays along. He knows I'll send him some coffee after-wards."

"But all these women you conquer surely don't disappear into thin air. You're not going to tell me you go around with all of them at the same time."

"It's here that we differ from all the other playboys. We are the only ones who practice the technique of "unhooking". You see there are very few of us here in Italy who are conducting serious scientific research into women..."

"Scientific research?"

"Yes, scientific research. You don't expect us to conquer today's women using the techniques of our grandfathers? There must be progress, new methods, avant-garde techniques ... and "unhooking" must enter into these techniques."

"You can simply tell them that you don't want to go on."

"No! That would be too easy. And then how do you put it to those clinging women who get stupid ideas in their heads, like marrying you for example? They'd always be under your feet. We have superior techniques. So you want to get rid of a girl? Follow her around for five or six days, become possessive, obsessed, extremely jealous, make a scene if you see her with a male friend, forbid her to go out, to go dancing, etc.."

Don't worry, in the end she'll leave you. What advantages are there? No trouble, tears or aftermaths."

"You really are two sons of a bitch."

"A few months ago I was with a stifling, clinging woman. She had got it into her head to nail me... I couldn't get rid of her. She didn't have a bust; totally flat-chested. So I take advantage of the situation, I begin to tell her I like women with enormous breasts, that even when I was little I dreamed of a woman like that and so on. Before I had finished speaking, she started to cry. She tells me that she's already been chucked in by two boys because her breasts were too small and that her sister who has a pair as big as two water-melons, finds all the boys she wants.

Feigning indifference, I reply that a solution can be found and all you needed was a bit of mental elasticity.

"I'll marry you" - I say - "As long as your sister lets me have a good suck at her breasts once a month."

"And what did she say?" I ask impatiently.

"She", replies Gianco, cool as ever, "hit me over the head with her bag. I grab the opportunity and explode. I get up, call her domineering, aggressive and vulgar. A poor soul like me trying every way to save our relationship and she ...

I've had enough of violence done to men" - I shout - "It's all over between us!"

"Before she has time to collect herself and reply I leap on my bike and get away at top speed.

If everything was up to us" - continues Ric - "Italy wouldn't be in an economic crisis or an over-seas balance of payment deficit. We'd all go to Switzerland or Germany and become the lover of some old woman who's rolling in it. And when we came back to Italy we'd get them to support us. All we'd need do would be to go and see them every so often to refresh their memories".

"Isn't that Emanuela?" - Says Gianco all of a sudden to his friend, pointing at a girl crossing the other side of the square.

"The one we had last summer?"

"Yes, it's her! Let's go, tonight there'll be a night of love."

They get up in a great hurry without finishing their beers.

"You must forgive us, Mr. Chemist, but work's work. See you later."

They jump on their bikes and shoot off in the direction in which the girl has gone.

I can't help laughing. What a place. My God, what a place!

I get up. It's almost time to go to the barber's. Do I need a hair-cut or a shave? Neither. In Paris, there was Madame de Stael's drawing-room and Madame du Tencine's; here at Monterupoli we have the barber's. It's the haunt or drawing-room I'd say, of the local male intellectuals. Here between one shave and the next, between one cut and a shampoo, there are discussions about sport, politics, or astronomy.

And the debate isn't limited to the customers. A great number of people frequent the barber's with the sole intent of reading the newspaper (to save having to buy it themselves,

of course) or to have a chat.

The discussion as to whether or not we should build nuclear power stations was held at Monterupoli at least ten years ago. Half of the electoral campaign of a few years back was held in the salons of the numerous barbers in the village, with many a heated discussion between customers.

Why do I go at this hour? Because about now the debate comes to life, the best orators arrive, and I, of course, go to express my opinion.

As chemist, to them I represent the Ministry of Health.

As I cross the square, **I meet Donato the runner**, who in tracksuit and plimsolls, is doing his jogging. They say in the village that he is training for the next Olympics. But three lots of games have gone by without his making an attempt. He is preparing himself meticulously, so say my fellow villagers, not like some of our national athletes who are ready after a few years!

You see him go by at the strangest hours and in the most unlikely places, prancing about in his blue tracksuit (from which he is inseparable) on which is written "MONTERUPOLI ATHLETICS CLUB". If there's some contest or any sports competition in which the colors of the village have to be defended, they inevitably call on him, and he inevitably loses.

Now **the village idiot** is coming towards me. He is tall, very thin, and he walks bent over as though he were crippled. He carries a red portable record-player always on, hanging from one shoulder. He has two or three records with him, and every so often he changes the record on the turn-table.

I've never been able to work out whether he puts the same records on because he is an imbecile, or whether he's become an imbecile because he is always putting the same records on. His expression is a happy one; he smiles stupidly with his big mouth.

"Good day, Mr. Chemist" he stutters.

He goes away with the accompaniment of the deafening music.

I walk a few hundred yards and meet **Andrea the contractor**. He is a big, tall, sturdy man, ex-emigrant, ex-plumber, ex-farmer, and goodness knows how many other ex's. Now he gets by doing a bit of brick-laying here and there. He's a good friend, always cheerful and ready for a joke.

"Mr. Chemist" - He shouts - "Dr Franzuti is back from his honeymoon, you know."

"There'll be big celebrations tonight then."

"Big celebrations? We've planned an evening that'll make the carnival at Rio look like a little family get-together! We've got twenty empty tar drums, some sticks ... all that's necessary to make enough din to wake the whole village."

"We'll meet under Dr Franzuti's balcony then."

"We're meeting at the bar first then about midnight, when the doctor is in the middle of his lovey-dovey, you know what I mean Mr. Chemist, a hellish din ... you can't miss it."

"Don't worry, I'll book a front-row seat."

Dr Franzuti is a sprightly man of about sixty who has remarried, after having become a widower for the second time. In spite of the fact that he is no longer a boy, he sought (and, after a long search, found) a virgin, much younger than himself.

Although he is very rich, he is known in the village and round about for his proverbial stinginess.

His latest venture was his exceptional honeymoon with his new bride, which was done according to the rules of economy and austerity. By taking three buses, with the laborious task of finding the right connections, he managed to visit all the little villages in the area in a single day. Departure in the morning, return in the evening, kilometers done ninety-seven, all for the very moderate price of fifteen thousand lira for two, packed lunch.

Andrea says goodbye, smiling. He is beside himself thinking about the fun of the evening which awaits him. For him as for many other people at Monterupoli, spending an evening like this is the equivalent of the old nobility of the nineteenth century, spending an evening at a concert.

Here at Monterupoli, they have a certain way of having fun that doesn't exist in the city. If you get married and spend your honeymoon at home, they come in the middle of the night and make a racket under your balcony. If you win a tournament or contest, they come and meet you at the station triumphantly. All this regardless of whether you like it or not.

But who gives them the right to treat each other with such familiarity you will ask. They take it themselves, they take it, you can be sure of that.

But, supposing you'll object, you don't know the other Monterupolese very well. You haven't got a lot of friends, you don't hang around with them very much. It doesn't matter. All you have to do is be a real Monterupolese. They do in fact have some form of respect for strangers.

They've played wonderful practical jokes here which to tell the truth have never been in bad taste). Once they arranged a phenomenal reception party for Mr. Chicco, the policeman. He had gone to cure his ailments at a spa, and feeling safe (at a good eight hundred kilometers from Monterupoli!) he had embarked on a nice affair with a woman there. But the devil stuck his nose in, and, though it was a chance in a million, it so happened that Chicco was seen behaving rather affectionately with this woman by a Monterupolese who was passing through.

The news got to the village before he did, and, passing by word of mouth, quite by

chance and totally unintentionally, it reached the ears of his wife. Knowing the welcome she intended to give her unfaithful husband, the whole of Monterupoli wanted to show its solidarity with the unfortunate latin lover.

When Mr Chicco arrived at the station he found the band there ('band' for want of a better word, for they were only a dozen of his friends who played the most discordant instruments, everyone doing his own thing) to welcome him and to show the pride felt by the whole village for his having upheld its "amatory" prestige.

His wife was of a different opinion, and made the unfortunate chap sleep on a tatty old sofa in the sitting room for more than a month.

I can already make out the first voices coming from the barber's salon.

"But these Arab thick-heads, who don't even know how to dress and are still going round in sheets like they did in the time of Jesus, are they trying to be a pain to us, old Europe? We'll chuck them all overboard."



"Yes, overboard into a sea of petrol".

"Gennaro, what the hell are you saying? If the USA acts like imbeciles in the Middle East and make war break out, am I going to defend the Yanks? I'll take to the bush. Partisans together. "

"You' re Just plain ignorant. What's going to the Middle East got to do with it? I'm talking about American missiles. They're a magnet real and proper. They'll attract all the Russian atomic missiles in the world fall on our heads. "

"No, neither one of you understands a bloody thing! In the event of war, nobody will touch Italy! Because Italy is the prize for the winner.

Tell me, Pasquale, if Russians destroys us with atomic bombs, when he's won the war, what the hell does he get: the rubble?"

Great! The discussion has already got going. Agenda: International Politics.

CHAPTER III



Sheer exhaustion! I feel shattered! You Jest but this husband profession is a very demanding business!

I know, I know, you're not having any of it; how can I be shattered - you'll object - if I haven't done a thing all day?

All right, it's true. But you must understand it's time for my afternoon nap, and if I don't pretend to be at least tired, how can I possibly rest?

I lie down on the lounge which is on the terrace. I put a big cushion under my head, a rug over my knees and I pull the canopy down so that my head is nicely in the shade.

What a lovely view, so much green ... oh, how the sight of the countryside relaxes me!

I can hear old woman number II turning everything upside down in the bedroom. No doubt she can't find something, and is rushing about, as it's almost time to open up the chemist's shop again. Go ahead!

Ruin your liver by running round, busying yourself ... looking for your lipstick or your powder ... the sooner you die, the sooner I inherit. No, don't worry, I'm not that unkind, I don't want anything to happen to her. But I've told her so many times:

"Take it easy, don't rush. Who gives a damn if the shop opens five minutes late? "

But no, she has to be quick, she must dash. She has so many things to do!

I close my eyes and an immense peace descends on me. How nice it is to rest after an "intense" day!

I hear meowing. I look round, it's Sweeney, our pet cat. She looks at me with her huge almond eyes and meows again. Maybe she wants to be petted a bit. I pick her up in my arms and stroke her. We're great friends, we are colleagues in a way. We are the only members of the household who sponge off the old dears.

I stroke her tummy which seems large and swollen.

"You slut! Pregnant again! Now I see why you disappeared in February!"

I feel like taking her and throwing her on the ground, for being so shameless. I calm down. It's better to try and talk these things out first without making too much of a fuss.

"Is it possible that you have to make it with all the cats in the neighborhood? You do realize that this sort of thing doesn't befit a chemist's cat?"

She stares blankly, yawns and settles down to sleep.

"Speak to me, you filthy slut!" I squeeze her neck, indignant at her impudence. "Tell me who it was?"

"Meow! Meow! Meow!" - She mews, trying to wriggle away.

"I know who it was anyway it was that; ugly moggy belonging to the greengrocer! Shame on you, the chemist's cat having it off with a cat of low social extraction. How many times do I have to tell you? You must go round with cats belonging to lawyers, doctors, notaries and so on!"

My wife, old woman number II, arrives on the scene and says good bye because she's going to the chemist's.

"I'm going dear" - she says - "You take care, don't over do it. Do as the doctor says, don't you be naughty like children always are."

"Don't worry, I'll be all right."

"Bye, I'm off."

I return her farewell and she goes. Luckily she didn't bother to kiss me or do any of those sloppy things that wives often do to their husbands. I am resting and I don't feel like doing "overtime".



I get back to stroking the cat who, in the meantime, has gone to sleep on my lap. I wake her up - if she thinks she's going to get out of a sound talking to like that she's mistaken.

"And so you're not going to let us know anything about your private life?" I ask her shaking her violently by the scruff of her neck.

She meows a few times.

"You come out with those 'meows' as if they were an explanation!"

I let the matter drop. It's like getting blood from a stone. I begin to stroke her again and

she closes her beautiful eyes and dozes off.

"You're getting old too. You've become lazy and dopey. Just a few years back you were tremendous. I used to be proud of you as I walked around the village. Do you remember those 'duels' you used to have with the other cats in the neighborhood?"

Nobody stood a chance against you. Every time it was like in the Westerns. I remember that afternoon when you fought one-eyed Terry, the terror of the area. He was on one side of Via Leopoldo, you on the other. You jumped off the wall and walked slowly towards him to the middle of the road, determined to have it out with him. The road was deserted in the heat of the August sun. I christened it "Midday Fire".

You both moved forwards fifty yards, slowly, staring each other in the eye. All it needed was the pistols and it would have become the most spectacular and exciting duel in the history of the west!

When you had got fairly near to each other and you were beginning to overcome him with your stare, Terry panicked and fled. It was a great victory - I'll never forget it. And you didn't fire a shot!

Amazing! Not even Buffalo Bill could have done that! That evening I gave you a whole bowl full of fish.

Sweeney is fast asleep. Maybe she doesn't like remembering the good old days.

"Sleep, sleep on. Somebody else is doing your thinking for you.

You know something. You 're right to enjoy yourself, to get screwed by all the cats in the area. Enjoy life. Some sucker will see to the kittens. You see this world is made up of slicks and suckers. You and I are slicks. Do you know the one about Pope B., when he'd just been elected?

Well I'll tell you. Pope B. was a self-made man, a poor soul. Just think - until then he had always lived shut up in a monastery. How was he elected? Maybe by mistake or because the various factions, unable to come to an agreement, had picked a name out of the hat.

When this poor fellow found himself dressed as pope, with the mitre on his head, and appeared at St. Peter's Square to greet the crowd, he was bewildered at the sight of so many people. To him, coming from the solitude and the peace of cloisters, it seemed almost impossible that there could be so many people in the world!

"My God! What a lot of people! He exclaimed "how can all these people manage to survive?"

"Your Holiness - whispered a Cardinal who was standing nearby - "they all swindle each other ... and we swindle them" - he added after a short pause.

Do you see what life is Sweeney? It's disgusting! It's a kind of arena where the lions eat the gazelles, the big fish eat the little ones. In this world, Sweeney, unless you're a crocodile you're soon swallowed up!

Yes, you've had it all easy. Your instinct, Mother Nature, has taken care of everything. But what about me?

What sort of life have I lived, a poor soul, shipwrecked on the ocean of the world, tossed this way and that by the waves? If I think of the story of my life I feel like crying. What an Odyssey! The changes of fortune that Ulysses underwent to get back to his home land compared with mine seem a pleasant holiday outing.

My misfortunes began very early on. At twelve I had already lost my peace of mind, disputed as I was by my parents amidst a confusion of lawyers, papers and courtrooms. It didn't take a lot to realize that they didn't give a damn about me; I was only an instrument in the hands of one used to strike the other. It had reached the point where the only thing that "kept them together" was the hope of hurting each other.

When they were finally reduced to a state of virtual poverty through paying the legal fees, they thought up a more economical way to sort out the 'dispute' "their' little boy", that's me. They decided to gamble for my fate.

As my father won at poker and my mother at pontoon they agreed to take it in turns to have me a month each. And so I became the commuter son.

I always kept a case packed ready under the bed. Sometimes it happened that my father had to go away on business, or that my mother had some engagement, so that I had to change residence unexpectedly.

In fact they swapped turns very freely according to the engagements they had. They saw themselves as sort of part-time parents.

I was certain of only one thing: as soon as the opportunity arose, I was going to get away from "those two" very quickly.

I got the chance when I was eighteen, having just finished school. I got a job as a clerk in a big city. The minute I was employed I ran home to get my case. While I was collecting my things together, my mother, who was in the kitchen, suspicious of my euphoria, came into my room. She found me busy sorting out my stuff, singing and dancing; to the sound of my old record-player.

"What are you doing?" - She asked in a surprised voice.

"I'm leaving" - I answered simply - "I'm changing, house, air ...life! "

"But it's not your father's month' yet!" - She replied, still unable to understand.

"My father? Who said I was going there? I'm off" - I shouted at the old woman - "I'm off to live by myself..."

"But your father? He'll be coming to pick you up in a few days. What shall I tell him? "

"Try telling him to bugger off".

"What! Tell your father to bugger off? After all the sacrifices we've made for you, after we've brought you up, made a man of you ..."

"Oh Mum!" - I interrupted her, cutting her dead with one glance - "don't make me laugh!"

"You will at least come and see us every other Sunday ?" - she asked, forcing out some crocodile tears.

"Yes, I'll come to see you ... every other century though, Farewell!"

I walked out of the door before she had time to start; on her long repertory to detain me: tears, threats, attempts to frighten me with the perils of life, etc. etc... All stuff that had been well tried out with my father at the time of divorce!

CHAPTER III



Lulu was much more promising. She was a fine good-looking woman, tall, blonde, with a girlish face, a big sensual mouth and two light, ingenuous eyes. It was a great love from the beginning. We were like two turtle-doves, who never stopped cooing. We left each other only to go to the toilet.

We were immensely happy, and we thought this joy would never end. But, as they say in my village, after the roses you come to the thorns. She turned out to be a fore-runner of our present-day feminists. Oh God, I'm not a monster, and I was prepared to admit that she was right about lots of things, but she had a way of understanding "women's liberation".

She was ready to defend all the rights of women, but when it was a question of chores she became deaf in one ear. So there were dishes to be washed? We'd do them alternate days. And what if there was a case, even a very light one, to be carried upstairs? I had to carry it, because otherwise I was a boor who treated a lady like a porter. And it made no difference if I was a hundred yards away; I had to drop what I was doing and come to her assistance!

Yes, I agree, the man should help the woman with the housework (she had almost

convinced me), but why was it always me who had to pay when we went to a restaurant?

I was a miser, a bore who didn't understand a thing. Equality yes, but chivalry was a different thing altogether!

But let's not bother about these things which, when all's said and done, weren't so very serious. It was her other "little" defect - I'd call it a mania - which made me leave her: she spent a "little too much" time in cemeteries. She used to wander about like you or I would walk along the promenade or in the park.

Lulu's father had been dead almost a year, and as she had been very fond of him, she often used to put flowers on his grave. At this time she would visit the grave of her mother, who had died more than ten years earlier and who was buried at the other end of the cemetery.

"If I go and see Daddy," she would say innocently with that mouth of hers which tasted of roses "I must go and see Mummy too, or else she'll get jealous...."

And after the mother why not have a look at the uncle buried a few hundred yards further on? Then it was the turn of the cousin who had died in a tragic car accident, the sister-in-law, the grandmother, etc., etc....

Seven graves I had to visit each time! And there were not two of them close together. They were miles apart, scattered at the four points of the compass!

At each one we had to stop to clean the marble slab, change the flowers, wash the statue, to say a long prayer.

It was my job to fetch the water. While she busied herself polishing the gravestones till they looked as if they'd been waxed. I went to and from the fountain with a bucket. I carried enough water in those two years to fill an artificial lake!

It was pointless trying to explain to her that her relations were now seated in Heaven's glory and so a little bit of dust on their gravestones wouldn't worry them. To her it was as though they were there beneath that marble, alive and kicking, listening to her and judging her.



"What would people think if they walked past and saw a grave covered in dust and surrounded by weeds? What would they say? That I am a degenerate daughter who has forgotten her father soon?"

"But if eighty per cent of the graves are lying there neglected and without a single flower!"

And then, of course, she made a number of friends in that macabre necropolis. All fanatics like her, who spent most of their spare time there in the cemetery.

"That man" - she said after saying hello to somebody - "had a son who died of leukemia when he was eight ..."

She knew them all: the woman whose husband had died in an accident at work, the little old man who came to visit his wife who was buried there, the boy whose brother was in the grave next to her aunt's.

And she often stopped to talk to them about their dead ones or their grave which was in a mess. They exchanged tips on how to keep the marble shiny or how to stop the flowers withering!

Christmas, Easter, August Bank Holiday, New Year, all the best holidays were spent up there. And that still wasn't enough. I would organize an evening in a night club or a bar, and go to the trouble of booking a table, and she would come out with.

"Darling, couldn't we pop into the cemetery for a moment first?" And so, what with one grave and another, it got dark, and appointments, bookings and even the desire to go anywhere went by the board!

I'd have willingly killed her. That way she could have stayed in that blessed cemetery for ever!

She often talked to me about the nicest burial chapels in the cemetery, she showed me them over and over again, pointing out the finer architectural points or their functional virtues.

"You see" - she used to say - "we're not even equal when we're dead. There's the rich who have beautiful chapels that look like villas, and there's the poor who are buried in the ground like a cat ... "



Her dream was to build herself a sumptuous ultimate abode, like the one Count Tacconi had, or Dr. Savini, with a big window, the tombs all laid out in a row, with a little altar and a velvet kneeling-rail

"That way" - she used to say snuggling up to me - "we'll always be together, darling, right next to each other."

It almost seemed we'd have had to spend our honeymoon in that chapel instead of going

there when we'd got old and lost our form!

She didn't care too much about buying a house - she was quite happy to rent one, but she'd have sacrificed anything to get a chapel all of her own!

One afternoon, as we were leaving that awful cemetery (which by then I hated from the bottom of my heart), she pointed to the houses being built right opposite the cemetery and said: "Darling, what do you think about getting a house here and coming to live here as soon as we're married?"

That was the last straw!

I fled without even replying. I ran after a bus and, without even looking to see what number it was, I jumped on. I never saw her again. I didn't even want to speak to her on the phone (I took it off the hook), because she'd have come out with her usual ingenuous question:

"Did I say something wrong, darling? "

CHAPTER IV

Things got off to a bad start with Rosy. On the day of the wedding she turned up at the church nearly two hours late. It wouldn't have been so bad if it hadn't given rise to a whole series of rather unfortunate little incidents. The first, and without doubt one of the more serious, was that, as it was the height of summer - and a beautiful day at that - we had to wait for her, roasting in the sun.



My "entourage" very soon began to grumble, and with considerable cheek took refuge in the cool of the church. The only person to remain on the look-out was me.

Not because I could stand up to the sun any better than they could, but because, as I was the cause of the whole thing (having chosen myself a sluggish wife), they didn't see any reason why they should make any sacrifices on my behalf.

"Stay there" - they told me - "you might even get a tan. As soon as you catch sight of the bride, run and let us know.

So I stayed alone in the scorching sun, without even a hat to protect myself. I Told myself that after all if you want to get married you must be prepared to put up with some discomfort, and I began to walk up and down, with my head already splitting. And that wasn't the end of it.

There was, in those days a football field next to the church, where the local kids liked spend their ,afternoons kicking a ball about. It so happened that by some quirk of fortune the football flew off the pitch and came to rest at my feet.

My first reaction was to give it a hearty boot back to the boys, but I restrained myself. Damn it! After all it was my wedding-day and it just wasn't done. The diabolical brats, meanwhile, to save themselves the bother of coming to get it, were shouting at me from the other side of the fence to throw it back. I pretended not to hear, hoping that the situation would somehow resolve itself. But it was hopeless. Not only did they egg me on in loud voices to throw their ball back, but they began to complain about my reticence.

I told myself that, after all, all that was needed was a little kick. It couldn't take more than a few seconds at the most.

I looked round and seeing that there wasn't a soul in sight I sent the ball back with a kick worthy of an international full-back.

Thud! - then came the crunch. At that very moment the bride arrived with all the relations! My father-in-law, who was a police superintendent (never marry a police superintendent's daughter) leapt out of the car and gave me a good dressing down.

He told me I was irresponsible, immature and a good for nothing. While I waited for my bride I passed the time shamelessly playing; football with a bunch of kids.

A minute later I got another ticking-off from my relatives. In fact, as I hadn't informed them of the bride's arrival, we found them all in various states of undress lying on the benches. Some had taken their jackets and ties off some had unbuttoned shirts or rolled their trousers up to their knee. A pitiful sight, impossible to describe.



Luckily for me my two tickings-off had to be cut short, as the occasion didn't allow them to run their full course. In the end, when everyone had composed themselves and formed a

presentable “entourage”, I headed off for the altar with my bride on my arm.

I don't know whether I was dazed from the tickings-off or because I'd caught the sun a bit, but whatever the reason, the fact remains that I didn't see the carpet and I tripped up. My head shot through the altar-rail and I ended up by smashing into the little wooden altar erected for the ceremony, knocking it over in the process.

You can imagine what an uproar it caused: wine-vessels, sacred texts, candles and flowers scattered everywhere. My father-in-law shouted left, right and center that “he'd said all along I was a clumsy oaf”.

The priest, not caring too much about keeping up appearances, cursed in a loud voice, complaining that I'd broken the ash-wood altar which had set him back God knows how much!

To cut a long story short, the only person at all concerned about my poor head was my mother (bless the woman! May she be close to God in Paradise!), who tried to soothe the bump by pouring on to it what little holy wine was left in the vessels.

I hardly remember anything else, only that the priest had to repeat three times the question "did I take this woman for my lawful wedded wife" because, dazed as I was, I didn't understand a thing.

Without any worries about being mistaken I can honestly say that "they married me" and not that "I got married".

At the reception I looked a right idiot. I was swaying backwards and forwards because of my head. I smiled at everybody and stuck out my hands mechanically like a trained chimpanzee. I had only a few minutes of freedom. I rushed off at top speed to the shelter of the restroom where I plunged my head under the drinking fountain.

At long last I could relax and let out two or three groans of "Oh! Oh! The pain!" which up till then I hadn't had a chance to emit.

When they came to get me to say goodbye to the guests who were leaving, I emerged with soaking-wet hair, half-closed eyes, and my hand stretched out. My mother-in-law, at a speed belying her age, chased me back into the bathroom quick as a flash, to tidy myself up. While I was doing my hair, sitting on the bowl, I savored my last minutes of freedom.

I don't remember a single thing about my wedding night. My wife must have done everything herself, for when I woke up the next morning with an ice-bag on my head she told me we had consummated our marriage.

My eyes sprang open in amazement. Was it really possible that I'd had so much energy in me? That my sexual instinct was so strong that I did “certain things” even in a state of semi-consciousness?

Then the penny dropped - my wife had sized the opportunity to pass herself off as a virgin when she could, and so give me the honor of deflowering her!

I was fucked, in all senses of the word! Married! Trapped! With a couple of terrible in-laws and a wife who could reproach me for the rest of her days for taking away her innocence as a dowry!!

CHAPTER V

TIME OF HOLIDAY



Summer, holiday time for everybody" Time to get out and about, to enjoy yourself, but for me nothing. No, it's not right! Every respectable profession has time off. Mine must have some too. "Close the chemist's"- you'll object - "and all go on holiday together".

Oh no, because it would be like taking my work with me, my wife to be precise; indeed

my light part-time job would become onerous and full-time, for I'd have to put up with her all the blessed day. After four or five days I'd be fed up to the teeth, and wouldn't do anything but count the days I had left till we went home. Tell me, which worker takes his job on holiday with him?

No, what I need is to come up with an idea which would allow me to get rid of the two old dears at least for a month, that is the real actual holidays, like any other social category. I need something which would not only allow me to go away on holiday, but would at the same time keep the two old dears far from me: something like leprosy.

That's it, I've got it, leprosy! No, don't worry, I have no intention of catching that terrible disease just to keep my wife away, only of pretending to be ill.

I need to find some ailment for which the doctor will advise me to spend a month in the mountains or by the sea. And all this must happen in a period when the old crones can't dose the chemist's and tag on or else it's bye-bye holidays!

Christ! This is the right period: Summer! What with all the tourists who've arrived in the village it would just about cause a scandal if they shut the chemist's. I'm sure that the Minister of Health would even intervene to summon the crones reopen their "pill-shop". Now I must get my brain working overtime right away, otherwise I'll have to wait until next year. I need an illness that's easy to simulate, and whose cure entails a month in some nice tourist resort. I'm counting out a nervous breakdown as well as smelling fishy a mile off, it's been done too often. I'll leave that to beginners.

And in any case how could I have a breakdown when I don't do a thing from morning to night?

I need something better. That's it: rheumatism, arthritis and such like! When I go home tonight I'll begin to complain about aches in my back and my sides. I'll make a show of the difficulty I have when I bend down and I'll grumble to myself about damp and the pains of old age. I'm sure the two crones will be as considerate as ever and advise me to get the doctor to have a look at me. Then I'll refuse with dignity, not giving them too much importance:

"What do you expect it to be? It's just my forty years! Come on, you'll see after a good sleep I'll have got over it!"

After two or three days of this, making the symptoms worse each time, you'll see - they'll take me bodily to the doctor's. Now all I need do is go to the library and read up on rheumatic complaints and similar disorders. I'm not one of your modem youngsters who dash into everything unprepared and irresponsible.

I've conned them all! After a week of back-ache, pains, difficulty in bending down, the two old dears begged me, almost on their knees, to go to the doctor. You should have seen how much care, how much attention, they gave me! Big pills and little ones, elastic belts,

thermometers, lamps, etc. etc... they'd transformed my room into a branch of the county hospital. They weren't far from bringing the entire chemist's shop home and continuing sales from there. My pills, of course, all went the way of the bowl.



But my piece de resistance came the day before yesterday when I bent down to pick up a fork which had fallen off the table. I pretended to get a terrible sharp pain and to be unable to straighten up again. They rushed to my assistance and, despite their 96 years (58 of the old woman number I plus 38 of the old woman number II) they managed to carry me to bed. They began to nurse me with creams and long massages on my spine.

The Next morning they forced me to go to the doctor's. I, of course, made sure that it was old woman number I (that is my mother in law) who accompanied me.

Why ?? The reason is simple: as I would have to get undressed, the crone would stay outside the door and I would be able to "talk" to the doctor.

It's one thing deceiving two old women, it's another thing hoodwinking a good professional. However, he was very understanding, partly due to the fact that he had been married for twenty years.

"What's wrong with you?" He asked me, motioning me to sit down.

"It's the Summer, the air, the sun ... the holidays" - I replied in poetic vein - "The little bird wants to be back in the wood, the air, freedom . . . and then my old rheumatics are playing up."

"Rheumatism in the height of Summer?"

"Mine is a special kind of rheumatism; given that my dear little wife can't close the chemist's and take some holiday..."

"You wouldn't like to lose out..."

"But think about it, doctor. Because of them I have to make sacrifices too. I would so like to take them with me, but it's not possible. So what do I do - stay at home with them?"

"You, of course, are very sorry to go alone"

"Doctor, you're a married man, like me. Tell me, is it a sin if someone serving a life sentence wants a bit of freedom?"

"No, it's not a sin!" - he replied, sitting down and beginning to write out a prescription - "On the contrary, it's a good thing. They should make it compulsory for husband and wife to have holidays away from each other. Look at me, for example, twenty years of marriage! Even a Saint would have had enough.

"So you' re one of us, doctor?"

“Yes, I'm one of you and you, my dear fellow, need at least a couple of weeks by the sea” - he said staring at me with a complacent smile - "I advise you to get lots of hot sand and little water!"

He sent me off with a wink and a hearty slap on the back. What a man. What a nice chap! There is no understanding like that between two people who suffer from the same ailment.



At the railway station the old dears cried like two fountains. What a job I had to detach myself from my wife's neck! And there was my mother-in-law who never got tired of giving me advice: "protect yourself from draughts, don't sweat, be careful of this and that!" She made it seem as if the world was a trap full of perils!

In the end they even managed to move me. Tears required out of professional seriousness? No, They were real; after all I've grown fond of these two poor women. Without me, I ask myself, what would they have done?

I don't understand how some husbands can kill their wives. Look at me. I married purely for money, and yet I get all upset at just letting go of their apron strings.

At last, I am on the train, finally free. I dry my last tears as it leaves the outskirts of Monterupoli and gets immersed in the dense green countryside. I look in the mirror and smile happily at myself.

“Hello there you old rogue. You should have been an actor. Compared to you John Travolta is Just a poor amateur!”

I can't help thinking: a month's holiday, a month's peace. An immense joy takes hold of me and, as I am alone in this old compartment, I can bounce up and down on the seat like a little boy:

“Freedom! Free at last! I won't be seeing the two old bags and those ugly mugs of my fellow villagers for a whole month!”

CHAPTER V

Stretched out on a deck-chair, with dark glasses and a minuscule bathing costume in the latest fashion, I tan myself divinely letting the warm rays of summer caress me.

I have been in this marvelous, still unspoiled, natural paradise. I've found an elegant hotel nearby and I'm leading the life of a lord.



There is a glorious sea, a hot sun, a clear, boundless sky. The sand, fine and yellow, is as clean as can be; at the most you might find the odd bit of seaweed. And as for the water! Clear, crystalline, and of the most beautiful blue ... it makes you want to drink it.

Where is this Eden still unexplored and untouched by the masses?

No, I'm not going to tell you, otherwise it would soon cease to be an Eden. You would appear on the scene like locusts, with cars, radios, tape-recorders, rubber dinghies and a thousand other tools of perverse industrial civilization, destroying everything in your path.

Even I have given myself the once-over so as to adapt myself, to some extent, to the beauty of the place: I've trimmed my moustache an up-to-date haircut, face-massages to smooth out the odd wrinkle, Turkish baths to shed those unwanted layers etc.. etc.. I look at least ten years younger.

But as if that's not enough, I've also left my spiritual cast-off up there in that old mountain-top village. I'm no longer the chemist of Monterupoli. As far as everyone here is concerned I'm a commercial representative, and to be exact I represent a pharmaceutical company.

I've chucked my wedding ringing into a drawer, and for more than a week I've been "Tony the bachelor".

If a girl asks me why I'm not married, I talk about how I've been let down by women, that I don't trust them etc. etc.. Believe you me, it always works, every woman believes that she can succeed where the others have failed, and fails into a trap.

I've become much more carefree and secretly I would rather fancy the idea of a pleasant flirt with a super-endowed blonde.

I met a very friendly group of people from somewhere up North, and I didn't hesitate to join up with them. They are all about thirty but they enjoy themselves as if they are young lads of fifteen or sixteen. They play, they joke, they run up and down the beach or challenge one another to the most incredible games of football, where the only rules are those of confusion and anarchy.

Is this eternal youth or just lack of common sense? I hesitated a bit, after all, I am forty five years old ... and then! Thought no more of it. You have to let yourself go, and not give a damn about what others might think of you ... a particular age at which it is no longer permissible to enjoy yourself does not exist. From a right Methuselah, boring and petulant, I

transformed myself, following their example, into a pestiferous guy, getting up to all sorts of tricks.



We have a right old time. We spend almost all day, broken only by lunch and the afternoon nap, larking about and throwing ourselves into this splendid sea. We also play the odd spicy trick, such as stealing the top half of a girl's bikini and then pass it round so that the poor soul, has to run from one person to the other, until she gets it back. Who knows when we will take the bottom half instead.

Well, you might say, what if they did the same thing to the bloke's "bottom half"? I'd be so embarrassed, and I'd run and hide myself behind the nearest bush. The only way I'd come out would be covered up with the traditional fig-leaf.

Then in the evening we transform ourselves into a happy little gang and do the rounds of the nearby villages. The other night we went to a beautiful little village on the coast. It was about two o' clock and there wasn't a soul about. Right in the middle of the main square we found a big fountain with two enormous circular basins. Without giving it too much thought we threw ourselves, as we were, fully dressed, into the water.

I won't tell you what fun we had splashing about, pushing and chasing each other, and climbing up those rather fine statues. We were so afraid of some policeman nabbing us that all it took was the arrival of a dog which was barking as loud as it could to put us all to flight. We got into the car just as we were, with our clothes soaking wet, and raced out of the place. We had to make a collection next day to get the seats cleaned!

I won't tell what it was like on the way back. We left a trail of water behind us that made us seem like a tanker; people on the footpath waved at us, making signs that the radiator was leaking.

To hell with the old woman, the chemist's, and the rest of it; this is what life's about! I've never enjoyed myself so much!

By the way, did you know? The old dears phoned me, they want to come and see me!

"No, I wouldn't if I were you" - I advised her - " the journey's too long. About twelve hours in the train, and then they' re talking about a rail strike (it was a downright lie) ... don't worry, I'm fine. Yes, the treatment is working wonders, you can see me improving by the minute. Yes, the place is very nice too, even though it's a bit boring, there aren't many people here, and they're all old ... don't worry, maybe I'll come and see you one day soon (I'd have to be mad!) ... don't wear your selves out ... you must look after the chemist's ...

and then in a few weeks I'll be home again ... yes, I know it's the first time we've been apart ... but you'll have to get used to it, I mean seeing as the treatment does me so much good I'll have to come back every so often to ..."

In the end I managed to put her off. They won't come to see me, but they'll phone me every day. I slip the waiter a big tip so that, whenever he informed me that the old dears were on the phone, he would say:

"Mr. Antonio, your mother is on the phone", and so he wouldn't drop the slightest hint that I was married.

I feel the deck-chair on which I'm sitting being lifted up on all four sides. Don't worry, it's my friends who have woken up!

They carry me bodily to the sea, as though I were on a throne. There they throw me into the water, deck-chair and all, including my sunglasses and the straw hat I bought just yesterday. It's their way of feting me, of saying good morning. As I fall I grab hold of one of them, making him share my fate. The others run off noisily along the beach. I chase after them and before long war breaks out, true and proper.

However I soon cease to be the center of attention as the hunt for somebody who's completely dry begins. One by one we catch them and throw them in the sea. Sometimes they lash out, they struggle so much that we have to drag them by the feet, leaving a long furrow in the sand. The last person to be thrown in the water is Lucrezia, a fantastic brunette who I've had my eye on since the day I arrived here. For the minute I've restricted myself to courting her, with no amazing results (only the occasional peck or caress), but it looks promising. One of these days I'll invite her up to my room, lock the door and throw the key from the balcony.

Ah! It's just what you need after five years of abstinence (bloody hell, you don't want to count my professional services!).

Somebody has the bright idea of going to dive off the rocks. We all agree willingly. A few hundred yards from here there are some islets with cliffs down to the sea, and fairly deep water round them. It's one of the best places for showing off splendid dives. The girls sit on the cliff-top while we (yes, I join in as well, forty or not) take turns at the "spring-boards".

I climb up for the first dive - and then I notice her: blonde, tall, very striking, she must be German or Swedish. I continue to climb up the rocks without taking my eyes off her for a minute: she has a wonderful body only slightly covered up by a minuscule yellow bikini. The idea a nice quick and easy adventure with a Nordic Viking appeals to me. Lucretia can go to the devil! By the time I get anywhere with her I'll be an old fool with a beard down to my feet.

I stop. Crikey, I've gone a bit too high up for my forty years! But it's too late - I can't go

back without making myself look like a coward.

I concentrate, so that I'll make a perfect dive, a clean entry into the water.

Suddenly I have an idea: why don't I throw myself in such a way as to surface beside the blonde Viking and so get a good look at her?



With this idea in mind, I take a run, breathe in, take off immaculately and make a perfectly vertical entry into the water. Floating up the surface, I am already savoring the joy of seeing that wonderful "morsel" close to. Ah, here we are at the surface, I emerge again.

Bang! A foot in the face!

"Lucretia, you bitch!"

She quickly get up from the rock on which she was sitting and runs off. I chase her. She dashes between the empty seats and sun-umbrellas. We circle each other for a while, but I catch her in the end and, picking her up, carry her into the water.

I held her under the water so long that I would have thought she'd have drunk half the sea!

Two of her friends, out and out feminists, rush to her assistance. They manage to throw me in the water and duck my head under, but I soon come up again. I give her a push and I carve my way through to a more hospitable place. It's getting too crowded here anyway. I can stop and get my breath back, safe on a rock. Lucretia and her friends bombard me with water, but they haven't the courage to come and attack me.

Sometimes I find myself thinking; is it possible that these people are thirty years old?

And me, almost fortyfive! Yes, and who gives a damn! Eternal youth, old chap!

The pause gives me a chance to reflect. With the gang following me round I'll never manage to pick up the blonde. I'll have to get rid of them, and then arrange to meet her away from here.

I need some pretext, something ... or even a bomb to blow them all up. I'm joking, of course. An hour or so later, while we are lying resting on our deck-chairs I get the perfect opportunity.

A boat which some fishermen use to take tourists to visit P. Island, not far from here, has arrived on the beach. I immediately come up with the idea of a boat-trip. They take it up enthusiastically and before long we're all on board.

Lucretia is happy, she wets my face to refresh me, and sits down beside me. I pinch her and tell her that the next time she kicks me in the face I'll hold her head under water for an hour, with her feet in the air. She makes faces at me and calls me a brute.

When we have got a fair distance from the shore I sit balancing on the side of the boat. It's an obvious invitation, and after a few seconds the reply comes. Lucretia gives me a hefty push into the sea.

Holding my breath, and swimming underwater I surface as near as possible to the shore.

They shout from the boat to see if they have to come back to pick me up, but I scoff at them. I reply that I don't feel like a boat-trip, and that I'm going back to the hotel because I'm expecting a phone call.

When I see them go off into the distance, I am as content as a father who, after so many preparations, has managed to put wife and kids on the train and pack them off to the mother-in-law's for a while.

I am pleased to get back to the shore. Now, come to me blonde! You won't be able to resist the charm of this newly-restored forty-five year-old. for long!

The stupendous Viking is still there, sunbathing on the rocks. I know an infallible way to buttonhole her. I climb up the cliff and dive in right beside her. Splashes of water reach her from every direction and she gets up indignantly.

I surface and offer my apologies:

"I'm sorry. It was unforgivable of me. I got my calculations wrong. Because, you see, diving from that rock I should have hit the water over there, and not here where I landed ... it depends on the thrust or on the run up. Yes that's what it must have been -my run up was too short. How come I didn't think of that before?"

She tells me not to worry; gradually her anger subsides and a smile returns to her lips.

"Don't worry, it was nothing, just a bit of water. With this sun it'll not take me long to dry off...."

"No, please" - I insist - "It was very inconsiderate of me. I am "forced" to offer you a drink to be forgiven."

Ten minutes later we are sitting at a table in the hotel bar with two marvelous beers in front of us. I've managed to find out a lot about her. She's Swedish, or, to be precise, from Gottherd ... how the devil do you say it, anyway you've understood ... from those parts ... and she is here in Italy on holiday. She doesn't have husbands or boyfriends in tow, but is here with some friends who are at present having a swim somewhere. She doesn't speak much Italian but to make up for it knows French very well (the language we use to communicate).

When she's not on holiday she's cosmetician in a beauty salon. Here in Italy she's staying in a hotel not very far from mine.

Perfect! I can court her without being discovered by the gang. I'm licking my lips already, a real tasty bit! I know, you mustn't count your chickens before they're hatched ... but I'm ok here, I assure you.

I put all my refined arts of seduction into action. They are a bit rusty, but after a jerky unsure beginning they are working wonderfully. I make her laugh a lot, I pass myself off as the typical happy good-time Italian, above all the Latin lover. It's better to lay your cards on the table- it saves time and money. I tell her I know Sweden very well (in fact I've only been once and for a very short time) and that I've traveled a lot.

Then the conversation turns to Italy, to its natural and artistic beauties; I offer to take her round the area, which I " know like the back of my hand ", (don't worry, I'll make sure I read up on it in a guide-book).



"You see, round here" - I say, still in French - " there are some beautiful beaches hidden by inlets along the coastline. Places that only a few people know about, which are real natural paradises: wildlife, crystal-clear water, fine golden sand ... the only trouble is you can only get there on foot or by boat.

"Really? " - she asks with her small well-defined lips - " I haven't been here long, and I don't know anything about the place."

"Believe me, we tourists are, after all, rather stupid. We all pile on to the same old, famous beaches, while there are still some uncontaminated, deserted places, where you can have a swim in peace ... take Priest's beach, for example..."

"What a strange name!"

"It's called that because they say that years ago a priest who was madly in love with a woman killed himself there. But I assure you it's fantastic. It's a marvelous bay enclosed in an inlet and you can only get to it by sea. But don't worry, the water's not very deep."

"Is it a long way away ?"

"No, fifteen minutes' walk at the most. Listen, would you like to go for a swim together? We can go to Priest's beach. You'll see it's really charming. Please, don't say no. My friends have all gone off on a boat trip, and if there's one thing I hate it's going for a swim by myself. I feel so small and defenseless compared with the vast sea ..."

She hesitates a little, but in the end she lets herself be persuaded. About twenty minutes later we are alone on beautiful "Priest's beach".

Lying on the beach we let the water gently caress our legs. I think of my friends who by this time will most definitely be back from their boat trip. Who knows what assumptions

they'll make when they find me gone? And above all Lucretia - what will she think?

I just don't know, but it's better not to think about it, and to dedicate myself to this marvelous Viking.

I move closer to her. Now I can distinctly smell her perfume, and an uncontrollable desire assails me.

I feel the urge to "jump on top" of her and take her like a brute, but I restrain myself. As good play-boy. I know that you have to wait for the right moment. Soup Should be eaten when it is cooked just right, not a minute before.

She becomes more relaxed, she lets herself go, confiding in me, as though I were an old friend. She talks about the Italy she is secretly in love with, the Italians - such nice cheerful people. She says she likes our food, our sun, our sea ... the happy- go-lucky bungling nature of the Italians. She comes back to our beaches nearly every year, and she always has a great time. Then she asks about me, what do I do, where do I live, etc. etc...

I tell her about my profession as pharmaceutical salesman, about my village on top of a hill ... peaceful, with pure air ... but so monotonous ... "with a beautiful girl like you certainly wouldn't be so monotonous."

She laughs, showing a row of brilliant-white teeth. My God, She's driving me wild! Calm down, I tell myself, remember you have to wait till it's cocked just right!

I begin to do a bit of the old romantics, "a piece" that once, when I was young, was my favorite number. I pay her a few compliments, talk about the infinite clear sea, the hot sun... of this wonderful beach and of we two "little tremors of life" in the middle of nature....

Little by little I gain a few more inches of beach ... the small-steps strategy of which Kissinger was so fond ...

By now I'm very close indeed. I can feel the heat of her amazing body, and an irresistible flame overcomes me. I talk, I talk a lot reviving all the poetic passages I learned in so many years of school ... I try to impress her, but most of all to entertain her ...

I gently put my arm round her shoulders; she doesn't draw away. I stare passionately into her eyes and reach out for her lips with mine.

I get a bucket of water over me, worse than a cold shower.

"Lucretia, you bitch!"

Before I am able to collect myself after the shock she pulls me away by the arm.

"This is my boyfriend!" she then shouts indignantly at the beautiful Swedish.

"But what's all this 'boyfriend' business?" I protest to Lucretia, showing my objection. The blonde, extremely angry, gets up and runs away. I follow, and try to explain.

"Don't listen to her, she's half crazy! She means nothing to me ... I hardly know her. I assure you, she is not my girlfriend."

She doesn't listen to me, and continues walking, quickly ahead.

“You Italians, you're all the same!”

“What do you mean, the same” I protest feebly “I'm different ... you see, that woman means nothing to me ... I met her here in the hotel ... yes, she may be jealous, she may have a crush on me but I have never reciprocated ... how can I explain to you?”

It's no use, she begins to run and soon disappears behind some dunes.

"Bloody Lucretia!" I swear "you'll pay clear for this. It may well be your damned mania for playing stupid jokes, your jealousy ... but this time you've gone too far. Christ, making me lose an assured fuck!"

I turn back. Lucretia has disappeared. After her bravado she has thought it wise to get the hell out of it. I rush back to the hotel and look for her. No sign of her anywhere, neither on the beach, in the common room with her friends. Nobody's seen her, they tell me that while they were away on the boat she dived into the water and swam back to the shore.

Curse her, she must have been suspicious of my behavior and followed me. This time I'm going to kill her!

I go back into the hotel and ask the desk-clerk if he's seen her. He says she's gone up to her room.

To save time I don't take the lift but go up the stairs four at a time. I walk into her room without locking, and find her sitting quite calmly on the bed, busy putting her make-up on.

“You daughter of a bitch!” - I shout - “You made me lose that bombshell I'll kill you!”

She runs away and I chase after her. She runs round the table laughing noisily. She jumps on to the bed and gets away off the other side. But I don't give up. I'm hard on her heels.

“You've made me lose an assured fuck! But you'll make up for it the fuck you made me lose, you can give me yourself - you're even better.

She pulls faces at me, which makes me even more angry.

I'll get you... and if you're not game ... I'll rape you like a brute ... you owe me a fuck ...”

She feints to one side and I end up on the sofa, but I collect myself immediately and resume my pursuit. She leaps nimbly on to the bed, but that's where she makes her mistake. With a dive worthy of Tarzan I "tackle" one of her feet. She tries to wriggle free and tries to gain leverage by grabbing on to the feet, of the wardrobe, but I don't lose my hold.

Gradually I climb up her as if I were scaling a rock: legs, bottom, back, head.

We struggle entwined on the bed rolling over a number of times. I squeeze her neck as though I wanted to strangle her, and she pulls my hair. She laughs enjoying it all.

Gradually our holds ... are transformed into caresses. I kiss her first on the neck, then on the chin, I feel for her lips and we melt together in an endless kiss.

"See, I'm better than your Swede!" She says catching her breath.

"Daughter of a bitch! Now I understand why you caused all that trouble ...”

“Yes, I wanted you. I wanted you for me alone, because I like you so much, and I couldn't bear the thought of you going to bed with that cow!”

I smile. A blaze of desire sweeps over me. I kiss her over and over again and feel her hot body come passionately closer to mine. Little by little I undress her...

The protagonist, in the piece which is missing, falls hopelessly in love with Lucretia, but after much hesitation, returns to his village, hoping to forget her.

He cannot do this, and after a deep crisis decides to live his "husband profession" and choose the path of love once more.

CHAPTER VII



I'm a sucker, I've always said I'm a sucker! But what am I saying? I'm mad. They should tie me down, gag me, prevent me from going through with this madness! But here nobody makes a move. They cast their empty indifferent glances on me without breathing a word, without even noticing me.

I put my case up on the rock, sit down, pull my handkerchief out and dry my tears.

Am I crying?

Yes I'm crying; I'm giving up my job my life, paradise. Does it seem so little to you?

I hear the doors slamming, the whistle of the stationmaster, gradually the train moves away ... I'm off, I'm going up there, to that gray foggy city in the North.

Yes, I'm going back to be among the mere mortals, to struggle, to suffer...

I wipe away another tear; I'm nervous, I can't sit still, I get up and go to look out the window. The roofing over the almost desert platforms passes slowly by, waves, some kisses fly from the lips of a girl towards an unknown receiver then ... the ever more rapid passing to the city.

Enormous buildings with countless square eyes, closed as though veiled by heavy sleep; the dark deserted streets with cars queuing along the footpaths, the squares dimly lit, by the feeble street-lamps. Every so often some sign of life is visible in the immense sleeping anthill: some dog rummaging through the rubbish, a light lit behind the curtains of some window or an occasional passerby fleeing from the night.

The train is going along half-way up the hill in the livid light of the day which is

beginning to dawn. I am seeing Monterupoli for the last time. Farewell little village where I dreamed a peaceful life, farewell houses, gardens, streets so full of life and people all day long. Farewell nice folk of Monterupoli, cheerful people, maybe full of faults but with such human warmth. Farewell wife, or rather farewell old dears, yes - old dears, wife and mother-in-law, because I never made a net distinction between the two.

When you find the note I left for you in the sitting room, who knows is you'll understand? Maybe not - locked in your provincial bigot mentality you'll never understand my revolutionary choice. Yes, because mine was a revolutionary choice.

“What was he short of?” You'll say. And indeed, what was I short of?

I had everything: well-being, peace ... a trouble free life.

I am a sucker. What can I do about it?

I'm a sucker. Some folk are born intelligent, some stupid; some are born with an obsession; for women or for butterflies ... I was born a sucker.

“You're looking for life” - I tell myself - “you're looking for struggle, for excitement. You'll realize what hell life is!”

One last look: there you are, Monterupoli, roosting placidly on the top of that hill, with your red-tiled houses your old white-washed walls, your narrow streets twisted like an entangled net, your squares, bars and the Medieval castle between the church and the clay ravines...

Farewell, we may never see each other again. I have fine memories of you. Here after all I have lived the most tranquil and most beautiful years of my life.

It's cold. I return to my compartment and sit down. I can't help thinking about my choice. Who made me make it? Nobody. It's the doing of the irrational component of the human brain. And of that emotional part of ourselves which we still haven't managed to explain or understand.



Why do we make war? Peace is so wonderful! Why does racism exist, and injustice, hunger and exploitation? We can cite a thousand reasons, tinge it with completely different ideologies, trace the whole thing back to the most obvious and elementary of causes, but maybe the explanation lies in that little touch of madness which is in us all.

What is it that drives the hardened smoker to smoke? Nothing, and yet he knows it does him harm; should he happen to suffer from bronchitis he risks putting an end to all his troubles, yet he goes regardless of every warning.

And I'm just the same, I'm addicted, addicted to life, to fight.

I can't live without suffering, struggling. I lead a peaceful life, unperturbed, without anxieties, and what do I do?

I throw it all away because I have to get back into the thick of the fray

I'm the personification of one of the greatest absurdities on this earth. Of all the many millions of ants that surround me I am one of the few who have understood the meaning of life, of happiness, and what do I do?

I waste this discovery of mine, I throw it to the wind with the same lack of awareness as a child who throws down an abyss a diamond whose value he does not know.

You're dreaming of struggles, of the routine of life" - I tell myself - "You're letting yourself be blinded by the illusions of love, letting yourself be conquered by your dreams, enchanted by two lips smelling of roses but ...

"Don't say that"- replies another voice inside me - "You're heading towards love, happiness ... a paradise strewn with flowers ... to her, Lucretia, don't you think?"

"Yes, yes, Lucretia, love ... you'll find out. How long can this latest honeymoon last?

A year or two, maybe three ... and then you'll be back to square one, struggling with your salary which is never enough the brats, the worries, the anxieties of life ... you'll have to work your guts out, run back and forth ...

How strange, and yet the idea doesn't terrify me! Is it possible that I have reached this point?

"Maybe you were painting things too black. Having a family doesn't mean filling your house full of little heads. One or two kids are enough. Working doesn't necessarily mean slogging away like a mule. You can easily find a job you like which leaves you lots of free time.

And the problems, the worries? Maybe one or two are not a bad thing ... they break up the monotony life.

"What are you saying! Do you have some doubts too? You're falling into a trap! You've been snared once again. And you just wait and see - with all this feminism that's about today you'll have to do the dishes too, and the washing ...

Yes, it'll be hard, I admit it ... but Lucretia's huge eyes stand out more than the light at break of day. They stare at me lovingly, and her fair face seeks protection on my chest. Her small delicate hands caress me with infinite love, and I feel her hot breath on my neck ...

Who knows how much she'll have cried! How happy she'll be to see me ... how tightly she'll hold me in her adorable arms. I wish that time and space would vanish and that she was here with me now, beside me ... I wish I could cover her face with innumerable tiny kisses all round her chin ...

Yes, it's love! **That is why life will never finish on this fucking planet!**

The End