

ROSSI'S INHERITANCE

In the cold and rainy weather which prevailed, the People's Cafe that evening was so crowded that many, lacking places to sit down, took their drinks standing around the tables, or walking up and down the room. And through the dense fog which floated from the old fireplace and gurgling tobacco pipes, such an uproar of words and laughter arose in the sooty room that even Virgona's ^{VIRGIN}~~daughter's~~ daughters, anxious as they were to look on and listen from behind the long counter, were constrained to stay in the kitchen near the open window to preserve their modesty, and to breathe.

At one table the men playing at cards disputed so heatedly that they seemed in momentary danger of flying at one ^other's throats. At another some huntsmen recounted their deeds with a great symphony of whistling and the baying of dogs behind the hare. And the dogs under the table, awaking startled, and deceived by the perfect imitations, began to bark in chorus and full orchestra, ending in whines and yelps as hob-nailed boots on their thin ribs kicked them into silence.

But from the table at the bottom of the room came voices more human and laughter more frank. It was the table of the professional pleasure-seeker, and of the news-mongers who, in the intervals of mocking the tall stories of the yamers all around them, told the anecdotes, scenes and adventures of their country life. On that evening ^eBeppo Costa held the chair, and his discourse was of a party they all knew.

"In this little scene, for instance", said Beppo, "I was party and witness the other day when I went to see Peppe of the ^B~~B~~og about some tiling he was to do for me. It was so long since I had been for a long walk, and the weather was so excellent, that I decided to go on foot, taking the by~~p~~-path past the new brick-kiln said by everyone to be so beautiful. Near the kiln was a little group of three or four houses and there I saw a cabman who was preparing to harness his old horse, and who at once asked me if I wished to mount with him.

"I am going to the Bog", he said, "to pick up two gentlemen who I took there this morning. And you?"

"I am also bound for that part".

"Then", he said, "get up; give me a cigar to smoke, and I will drive you there!" Looking at his disconsolate old hack and the ramshackle cab with its battered hood, I felt a desire to continue on foot, but -- I mounted.

While he finished attaching the horse to the cab and, in doing so, getting the harness entangled in an extraordinary manner, he recounted to me a whole mountain of miseries, of his family, and of his trade, which no longer was so good as it had been. He told me that his name was Rossi, and wished to know mine, from what part I came, and what I was going to do at the Bog. When I had told him all he appeared satisfied, and begged me to pardon him for having kept me waiting so long. He asked that I should give him my sympathy for his mind was so full of trouble that he was like to lose his senses. No sooner was all in order than he mounted quickly to the box-seat and crack! crack! came mad blows on the bony carcass of the old horse.

The road we traversed was a continuous succession of short levels, steep ascents and dangerous declivities, but for Rossi they were all on a par. He flicked the horse sharply enough to pull out its hair, and away!

"Ah, no, dear Rossi, I don't like this at all", I said. "At the ascents you must respect the horse; at the descents our skins, but if you don't agree with me I will get down and go on foot as I intended".

Rossi was mortified; he turned towards me and, with an air of compunction and a gesture of desolation, said: "Will you believe me, Sor Costa? This day I do not know what I am doing. Did you know Sor Augusto? He who has such fine horses who has that beautiful villa with the beautiful avenue with the beautiful pine-woods beneath a beautiful tower!"

"Augusto.... Augusto.... Ah! I know. Well?"

"He died this morning at six o'clock!"

"Peace to his soul".

"....and this evening they say -- the lawyer has just arrived -- they say

that the will is to be opened this evening".

"That is very interesting. But what have you to do with the lawyer, with the will, and with Sor Augusto?"

"I am a far-off relative of his because... you see? An aunt of his sister, good soul -- that very rich one who left everything to him -- married a cousin of a niece of the brother of Gianni, of Innisfail, who is brother-in-law...."

"Stop, Rossi", I cried. "It is useless to go on, because now I understand everything perfectly....so you started off a poor man, and there is a chance.... oh, Rossi! there is the chance that this evening when you return home you may...."

"Ahu, ahu!" Shouts, cracks of the whip, and down, at breakneck speed, a descent which made the hair stand on end. There was a hurricane of stones which rushed whizzing into the fields and ditches on both sides of the road, and a scurrying of gogs which followed us ^{each} time our "tempest" passed before a house.

"Rossi, for God's sake!" I may as well ^{have} spoken to the horse.

"Ahu! Ahu! This evening, Sor Costa, you must have wine. Ahu! Ahu!"

Fortunately the descent ended soon and we arrived, safe and sound at the bottom. We were quickly on an ascent again, but the poor horse showed the wisdom that Rossi lacked. After travelling about half a mile, I learned by ~~observation~~ observation to moderate the passions at my will. Rossi abandoned himself to those impulses of enthusiasm every time I made him see the possibility that Sor Augusto may have remembered him in his will; he fell into a state of desolate prostration when I made him lose hope. I profitted by this observation to save my neck and to suit my own convenience.

"Too many, too many, these relatives, my dear Rossi. You see everything is possible. But I, if I were you, dear Rossi, would put faith in my own arms and in my children. Those are the true riches, the real flowers of God, the true things which thieves cannot steal or fire consume".

Rossi sighed; the reins fell before him, and the horse began to walk.

"You speak like an angel from Heaven", he said.

"It is nothing, dear Rossi. I have said only what my heart suggests to me, thinking of your family and your condition".

A long stretch of flat road presented itself before us when we arrived at the top of that hillock. This, I thought, ~~was~~ may be made very well at the trot.

"Let us understand one another well, Rossi. By this I do not mean to take hope from you and to exclude the possibility...."

Rossi breathed again!

"By all accounts I have heard say that this Sor Augusto was a good man, charitable, religious...."

"Oh, yes, yes".

The reins were taken up again and the whip had begun to circle in the air with suspicious intention. The road is good, I thought, so now we may let ourselves go.

"Cheer up, Rossi. If Sor Augusto was the fine man they said he was, he would not at the point of death have forgotten his poor relations".

"Yes, yes, you're right!" He jerked about on his seat until the cab shook, and the whip tickling viciously the bony frame of the horse, the animal broke into a staggering gallop.

"If I should become a rich man this evening! Most Holy Mary! Merciful Virgin
Ah! Ah! and down came a deluge of blows on the ribs of the unhappy beast.

"Fifty thousand francs!" I had to shout to make myself heard above the rattle of the cab. "Fifty thousand francs! What would you do this evening if it were true,

"I should beat my wife, burn the house and get drunk on holy oil", and away, away, away!

We were approaching a beastly declivity and I decided to shut down the safety-valve to preserve our limbs, and the old horse.

"Do you know, Rossi, what I like very little in this matter? Perhaps that

old servant, from what I've heard, has become mistress of everything Augustos had towards the last. And that serpent won't be very favorably disposed towards you others, d'ye think?"

"She'd like to burn us!"

The whip was put back in the socket, the reins dropped on the horse's back, and the elderly moke was not unattentive to these signs. In fact, after a few steps I had to ask Rossi to touch him up a little, else he would have stopped altogether,

"Has that woman any relations?"

"A swarm of them. They're like rabbits. But do you think they could do us much harm? Before her time Sor Augusto always sent us a flask of wine at holiday times, and either a schiacciata * or a panoforte * according to whether it was Easter or Christmas. But from the time she entered the house all that came to an end. There's one thing: if anyone puts an end to her it will be Rossi. See that cross? Look me well in the face. If, when I go home this evening he has not left me anything, and that he has left even twenty francs to her..... Sor Costa, I have five children who have suffered hunger this winter but if I see that woman with a full mouth, laughing at us with twenty francs in her hand if that should happen, Sor Costa, I tell you at once: Rossi will finish in gaol. Sor Costa, there is the cross".

And he lifted his hat. I understood that he had made a vow. That act took away all my desire to question him, and I began to regard the unfortunate man from another point of view.

"You'll not kill anyone, friend Rossi. You must think of your family,

* *

Italian Two rich cakes which are eaten at Easter and Christmas respectively, by all classes, and have the same importance in the national feasting as the old English plum pudding.

"Sor Costa, I have said some mad things...I know, I know".

The descent had ended, and we had entered a valley where the smooth road ran straight on to the Bog. There was no longer any question of fast going and we let the horse amble along as he would. Rossi settled himself down in his seat, turned up the hairless fur collar of his coat to keep off the wind, and crouched down with his head between his hands. Presently I realised that he was weeping.

"Come, friend Rossi, courage, courage. A man must not weep".

He descended from his seat and asked: "Will you allow me?"

"Of course! Come, come." And he came and sat down near me under the hood. His eyes were troubled as he looked at the smoking carcass of his horse on which depended the scanty bread of the family. Then continuing his thoughts aloud: "He serves me for now, but he is old. If he dies I am a beggar. Now if you don't object we will keep a quiet pace until we reach the end of those houses down ^{there.} Do you mind?"

"No, no. On the contrary I shall be very pleased...."

"Ah, signor, you should have seen the horse and cab I had before these! But it was my luck to have to sell up a lot of things and to exchange. Son of a dog! He surprised me when I was at the last gasp. He took me in with that unhappy carcass there that holds its soul between its teeth, and this disgraceful wreck of a machine that stands upright by a miracle. And while we can keep on, God help us. He cheated me because he knew we were in want. This ugly gaol-bird who stands before you and his family have not seen bread all the winter".

A flood of tears dropped on to his ragged beard.

"And that woman! And those cheating relations of hers will have everything. And no one knows what we suffer because we have some little pride, and we should be ashamed to show our misery to the world. ⁶ Rossi is cheerful. Things are going good with Rossi ⁷. If those that speak that way could see my heart they

would drop down with fright. I had opened a little shop for pots and brooms — you know, a little of everything. They set up a co-operative store and I had to close. Those unfortunate children I have at home and their poor mother and I, from seven o'clock last evening — may I die if it is not true — we have had one pound of bread among us. That is all".

I looked at him in silence, thinking many sad thoughts. Rossi also shut himself in his misery and we went slowly on our way without speaking. Then all at once we were startled by a voice shouting behind us. We turned, and afar off we saw a boy running, and making signs for us to await him.

"Toh!" said Rossi. ^{It} "It is my eldest boy. What now?"

"Oh, stop-p-p-p, father-r-r-r!" the boy cried, breathless and perspiring from a distance.

"What do you want?"

"Come back at once!"

"What has happened?"

"Mother says they want you at Sor Augusto's house. They ^{say} that in his will he has left you a thousand francs!" And he tossed his hat in the air and began to turn catherine-wheels in the middle of the road.

"God in Heaven!" cried Rossi, and, without bethinking himself of me, he hurriedly turned the horse and: "Ahu! ah! away, away, away!"

I shouted to him but he took no notice, and:

"Away, away, away!"

Luckily for me he had to stop to take the boy up, and I seized the moment to leap from the cab, to avoid the danger of being entrapped. But he flung himself on me to embrace me and wish to take me with him at any cost.

"Signor Costa, I shall take it badly if you don't come and rejoice with me. As a baptised Christian, I shall take it badly of you".

And then he threw himself on the boy, all white from his performance on the dusty road, with an ^{AVALE} ~~avalanche~~ of kisses, smacks and tickling.

"A thousand francs! God in heaven!"

A thousand francs was indeed a fortune in that community where old customs clung and a dollar was called a franc by all and sundry, as you well know. But Rossi was beyond caring what it was called, for without realising what he was doing, in the tempestuous condition of his thoughts, he sent spinning from his hand a piece of bread which the boy had brought for him, and had offered for his acceptance.

"Pick it up. I will eat it later. I am not hungry any longer. A cigar.... Signor Costa, will you give me one? Thank you. And the reins....and the whip.... and the boy....and I?"

He seemed to have gone really mad.

"A thousand francs! and the cigar? Ah, here it is"

He stuck it in his mouth without lighting it, without remembering me, or returning my salute, jumped into his cab and off! at a pace to take away the breath.

. . . .

Beppo Costa asked Virgona for a straw with which to clean his pipe and the operation accomplished, he demanded the time as he wished to go to bed.

"Toh! is that all then?" asked the many listeners around the table.

Beppo Costa, finding it was barely nine o'clock and that it was raining heavily, withdrew into a corner, and ordered another drink which he sipped quietly.

"And then did Rossi beat his wife? Did he burn the house down? Did he get drunk on holy oil?"

"If tomorrow is a fine day", replied Beppo, looking into the face of the most insistent, "if tomorrow is a fine day, you have my permission to go and ask him."