

Little Mexican

BY ALDOUS HUXLEY

THE shopkeeper called it, affectionately, a little Mexican; and little, for a Mexican, it may have been. But in this Europe of ours, where space is limited and the scale smaller, the little Mexican was portentous, a giant among hats. It hung there, in the center of the hatter's window, a huge black aureole, fit for a king among devils. But no devil walked that morning through the streets of Ravenna: only the mildest of literary tourists. Those were the days when very large hats seemed in my eyes very desirable, and it was on my head, all unworthy, that the aureole of darkness was destined to descend. On my head; for at the first sight of the hat I had run into the shop, tried it on, found the size correct, and bought it, without bargaining, at a foreigner's price. I left the shop with the little Mexican on my head, and my shadow on the pavements of Ravenna was like the shadow of an umbrella pine.

The little Mexican is very old now and moth-eaten and green. But I still preserve it. Occasionally, for old associations' sake, I even wear it. Dear Mexican! It represents for me a whole epoch of my life. It stands for emancipation and the first years at the university. It symbolizes the discovery of how many new things, new ideas, new sensations!—of French literature, of alcohol, of modern painting, of Nietzsche, of love, of metaphysics, of Mallarmé, of syndicalism, and of goodness knows what else. But above all I prize it because it reminds me of my first discovery of Italy. It re-evokes for me, my little Mexican, all the thrills and astonishments and virgin raptures of that first Italian tour in the early autumn of

nineteen hundred and twelve. Urbino, Rimini, Ravenna, Ferrara, Modena, Mantua, Verona, Vicenza, Padua, Venice—my first impressions of all these fabulous names lie, like a hat full of jewels, in the crown of the little Mexican. Shall I ever have the heart to throw it away?

And then, of course, there is Tirabassi. Without the little Mexican I should never have made Tirabassi's acquaintance. He would never have taken me, in my small unemphatic English hat, for a painter. And I should never, in consequence, have seen the frescoes, never have talked with the old Count, never heard of the Colombella. Never . . . When I think of that, the little Mexican seems to me more than ever precious.

It was, of course, very typical of Tirabassi to suppose, from the size of my hat, that I must be a painter. He had a neat military mind that refused to accept the vague disorder of the world. It was obvious to him from the first moment he saw me in the restaurant at Padua that I must be a painter. All painters wear large black hats. I was wearing the little Mexican. Ergo, I was a painter.

He sent the waiter to ask me whether I would do him the honor of taking coffee with him at his table. For the first moment, I must confess, I was a little alarmed. This dashing young lieutenant of cavalry—what on earth could he want with me? The most absurd fancies filled my mind: I had committed, all unconsciously, some frightful solecism; I had trodden on the toes of the lieutenant's honor, and he was about to challenge me to a duel. From this anguish of mind the waiter,

returning a moment later with my fried octopus, delivered me. The Lieutenant Count, he explained in a whisper of confidence, had a villa on the Brenta, not far from Strà. A villa—he spread out his hands in a generous gesture—full of paintings. The Count would be delighted to take me to see them. He left me, still puzzled, but vastly relieved. At any rate, I was not being called upon to make the very embarrassing choice between swords and pistols.

Surreptitiously, whenever he was not looking in my direction, I examined the Lieutenant Count. His appearance was not typically Italian. He was not, that is to say, blue jowled, beady eyed, swarthy, and aquiline. On the contrary, he had pale ginger hair, gray eyes, a snub nose, and a freckled complexion. I knew plenty of young Englishmen who might have been Count Tirabassi's less vivacious brothers.

He received me, when the time came, with the most exquisite courtesy, apologizing for the unceremonious way in which he had made my acquaintance. "But as I felt sure," he said, "that you were interested in art, I thought you would forgive me for the sake of what I have to show you."

I couldn't help wondering why the Count felt so certain about my interest in art. It was only later, when we left the restaurant together, that I understood; for as I put on my hat to go, he pointed with a smile at the little Mexican. "One can see," he said, "that you are a real artist." I was left at a loss, not knowing what to answer.

After we had exchanged the preliminary courtesies the Lieutenant plunged at once, entirely for my benefit, I could see, into a conversation about art. "Nowadays," he said, "we Italians don't take enough interest in art. In a modern country, you see . . ." He shrugged his shoulders, leaving the sentence unfinished. "But I don't think that's right, I adore art. Unfortunately," he added, after a moment, "one hasn't got much time."

I agreed with him. "When one can get to Italy only for a month at a stretch, like myself . . ."

"Ah, but if only I could travel about the world like you!" The Count sighed. "But here I am, cooped up in this wretched town. And when I think of the enormous capital that's hanging there on the walls of my house . . ." He checked himself, shaking his head. Then, changing his tone, he began to tell me about his house on the Brenta. It sounded altogether too good to be true. Carpioni, yes—I could believe in frescoes by Carpioni; almost anyone might have those. But a hall by Veronese, but rooms by Tiepolo, all in the same house—that sounded incredible. I could not help believing that the Count's enthusiasm for art had carried him away. But in any case, tomorrow I should be able to judge for myself; the Count had invited me to lunch with him.

We left the restaurant. Still embarrassed by the Count's references to my little Mexican, I walked by his side in silence up the arcaded street.

"I am going to introduce you to my father," said the Count. "He too adores the arts."

More than ever I felt myself a swindler. I had wriggled into the Count's confidence on false pretenses; my hat was a lie. But the Count was so busy complaining to me about his father that I had no opportunity to put in my little explanation. I didn't listen very attentively, I confess, to what he was saying. In the course of a year at Oxford I had heard so many young men complain of their fathers. Not enough money, too much interference—the story was a stale one.

"Eccoci," said the Count. We halted in front of the Café Pedrochi. "He always comes here for his coffee."

And where else, indeed, should he come for his coffee? Who, in Padua, would go anywhere else?

We found him sitting out on the terrace at the farther end of the build-

ing. I had never, I thought, seen a jollier-looking old gentleman. The old Count had a red weather-beaten face, with white mustaches bristling gallantly upward and a white imperial in the grand Risorgimento manner of Victor Emmanuel the Second. Under the white tufty eyebrows, and set in the midst of a web-work of fine wrinkles, the eyes were brown and bright like a robin's. His long nose looked, somehow, more practically useful than the ordinary human nose, as though made for fine judicial sniffing, for delicate burrowing and probing. Thickset and strong, he sat there solidly in his chair, his knees apart, his hands clasped over the knob of his cane, carrying his paunch with dignity, nobly, I had almost said, before him. He was dressed all in white linen, for the weather was still very hot and his wide gray hat was tilted rakishly forward over his left eye. It gave one a real satisfaction to look at him: he was so complete, so perfect in his kind.

The young Count introduced me. "This is an English gentleman. Signor . . ." He turned to me for the name.

"Oosselay," I said, having learned by experience that that was as near as any Italian could be expected to get to it.

"Signor Oosselay," the young Count continued, "is an artist."

"Well, not exactly an artist," I was beginning; but he would not let me make an end.

"He is also very much interested in ancient art," he continued. "Tomorrow I am taking him to Dolo to see the frescoes; I know he will like them."

We sat down at the old Count's table; critically he looked at me and nodded. "*Benissimo*," he said and then added: "let's hope you'll be able to do something to help us sell the things."

This was startling. I looked in some perplexity toward the young Count. He was frowning angrily at his father. The old gentleman had evidently said the wrong thing; he had spoken, I guessed, too soon. At any rate, he took

his son's hint and glided off serenely on another tack.

"The fervid phantasy of Tiepolo," he began rotundly, "the cool unimpassioned splendor of Veronese—at Dolo you will see them contrasted." I listened attentively, while the old gentleman thundered on in what was evidently a set speech. When it was over the young Count got up; he had to be back at the barracks by half-past two. I too made as though to go; but the old man laid his hand on my arm. "Stay with me," he said. "I enjoy your conversation infinitely." And as he himself had hardly ceased speaking for one moment since first I set eyes on him, I could well believe it. With the gesture of a lady lifting her skirts out of the mud (and those were the days when skirts still had to be lifted), the young Count picked up his trailing saber and swaggered off, very military, very brilliant and glittering, like a soldier on the stage, into the sunlight, out of sight.

The old man's bird-bright eyes followed him as he went. "A good boy, Fabio," he said, turning back to me at last, "a good son." He spoke affectionately; but there was a hint, I thought, in his smile, in the tone of his voice, of amusement, of irony. It was as though he were adding, by implication: "But good boys, after all, are fools to be so good." I found myself, in spite of my affectation of detachment, extremely curious about this old gentleman. "What I should do without him," the old gentleman continued, "I really don't know. The way he manages the estate is simply wonderful." And he went rambling off into long digressions about the stupidity of peasants, the incompetence and dishonesty of bailiffs, the badness of the weather, the spread of phylloxera, the high price of manure. The upshot of it all was that, since Fabio had taken over the estate, everything had gone well; even the weather had improved. "It's such a relief," the Count concluded, "to feel that I have some one in charge on whom

I can rely, some one I can trust, absolutely. It leaves me free to devote my mind to more important things."

I could not help wondering what the important things were; but it would have been impertinent, I felt, to ask. Instead, I put a more practical question. "But what will happen," I asked, "when your son's military duties take him away from Padua?"

The old Count gave me a wink and laid his forefinger, very deliberately, to the side of his long nose. The gesture was rich with significance. "They never will," he said. "It's all arranged. A little *combinazione*, you know. I have a friend in the Ministry. His military duties will always keep him in Padua." He winked again and smiled.

I could not help laughing, and the old Count joined in with a joyous ha-ha that was the expression of a profound satisfaction, that was, as it were, a burst of self-applause. He was evidently proud of his little *combinazione*. But he was prouder still of the other combination, about which he now confidentially leaned across the table to tell me. It was decidedly the subtler of the two.

"And it's not merely his military duties," he said, wagging at me the thick, yellow-nailed forefinger which he had laid against his nose, "it's not merely his military duties that'll keep the boy in Padua. It's his domestic duties. He's married. I married him." He leaned back in his chair and surveyed me, smiling. The little wrinkles round his eyes seemed to be alive. "That boy, I said to myself, must settle down. He must have a nest, or else he'll fly away. And his poor old father will be left in the lurch. He's young, I thought, but he must marry. At once." And the old gentleman made great play with his forefinger. It was a long story. His old friend, the Avvocato Monaldeschi, had twelve children, three boys and nine girls. The eldest girl was just the right age for Fabio. No money, of course; but a good girl and pretty and very well brought up and religious.

Religious—that was very important, for it was essential that Fabio should have a large family—to keep him more effectually rooted, the old Count explained, and with these modern young women brought up outside the Church one could never be certain of children.

Well, the next thing, of course, was that Fabio should be induced to select her. Only a consummate diplomat could have succeeded. He did it by throwing them together a great deal and talking, meanwhile, about the rashness of early marriages, the uselessness of poor wives, the undesirability of wives not of noble birth. It worked like a charm; within four months, Fabio was engaged; two months later he was married and ten months after that he had a son and heir. And now he was fixed, rooted. The old gentleman chuckled; and I could fancy that I was listening to the chuckling of some old white-haired tyrant of the *quattrocento* congratulating himself on the success of some peculiarly ingenious stroke of policy—a rich city induced to surrender itself by fraud, a dangerous rival lured by fair words into a cage and trapped. Poor Fabio, I thought; and also what a waste of talent!

Well, the old Count went on, now Fabio lived on the estate, in the big painted house at Dolo. Three days a week he came into Padua for his military duties and the rest of his time he devoted to the estate. It brought in now more than it had ever done before. But goodness knew, the old gentleman complained, that was little enough. Bread and oil and wine and milk and chickens and beef—there was plenty of those and to spare. Fabio could have a family of fifty and they would never starve. But ready money, there wasn't much of that. "In England," the Count concluded, "you are rich. But we Italians . . ." He shook his head.

I spent the next quarter of an hour trying to persuade him that we were not all millionaires. But in vain. My memories of Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Webb

carried no conviction. In the end I gave it up.

The next morning Fabio appeared at the door of my hotel in a large, very old, and very noisy Fiat. It was the family machine-of-all-work, bruised, scratched, and dirtied by years of service. Fabio drove it with a brilliant and easy recklessness. We rushed through the town, swerving from one side of the narrow street to the other with a disregard for the rules of the road which, in a pedantic country like England, would have meant at the least a five-pound fine and an endorsed license. But here the Carabinieri, walking gravely in couples under the arcades, let us pass without comment. Right or left—after all, what did it matter?

“Why do you keep the silencer out?” I shouted through the frightful clamor of the engine.

Fabio slightly shrugged his shoulders. “*E più allegro così*,” he answered.

I said no more. From a member of this hardy race which likes noise, which enjoys discomfort, a nerve-ridden Englishman could hardly hope to get much sympathy.

We were soon out of the town. Trailing behind us a seething white wake of dust and with the engine rattling off its explosions like a battery of machine-guns, we raced along the Fusina road. On either hand extended the cultivated plain. The road was bordered by ditches and on the banks beyond, instead of hedges, stood rows of little pollards, with grape-laden vines festooned from tree to tree. White with the dust, tendrils, fruit, and leaves hung there like so much goldsmith’s work sculptured in frosted metal, hung like the swags of fruit and foliage looped round the flanks of a great silver bowl. We hurried on. Soon, on our right hand, we had the Brenta, sunk deep between the banks of its canal. And now we were at Strà. Through gateways rich with fantastic stucco, down tunnels of undecided shade, we looked in a series of momentary glimpses into the

heart of the park. And now for an instant the statues on the roof of the villa beckoned against the sky and were passed. On we went. To right and left, on either bank of the river, I got every now and then a glimpse of some enchanting mansion, gay and brilliant even in decay. Little baroque garden houses peeped at me over walls and through great gates at the end of powdery cypress avenues, half humorously, it seemed, the magniloquent and frivolous façades soared up in defiance of all the rules. I should have liked to do the journey slowly, to stop here and there, to look, to savor at leisure; but Fabio disdained to travel at anything less than fifty kilometers to the hour and I had to be content with momentary and precarious glimpses.

The car slowed down and came to a standstill in front of a huge imposing gate. Fabio hooted impatiently on his horn; there was a scurry of footsteps, the sound of bolts being drawn and the gate swung open. At the end of a short drive, very large and grave, very chaste and austere, stood the house. It was considerably older than most of the other villas I had seen in glimpses on our way. There was no frivolousness in its façade, no irregular grandiloquence. A great block of stuccoed brick; a central portico approached by steps and topped with a massive pediment; a row of rigid statues on the balustrade above the cornice. It was correctly, coldly even, Palladian. Fabio brought the car to a halt in front of the porch. We got out. At the top of the steps stood a young woman with a redheaded child in her arms. It was the Countess with the son and heir.

The Countess impressed me very agreeably. She was slim and tall—two or three inches taller than her husband; with dark hair drawn back from the forehead and twisted into a knot on the nape of her neck; dark eyes, vague, lustrous and melancholy as the eyes of a gentle animal; a skin brown and transparent like darkened amber. Her manner was

gentle and unemphatic. She rarely gesticulated; I never heard her raise her voice. She spoke, indeed, very little. The old Count had told me that his daughter-in-law was religious, and from her appearance I could easily believe it. She looked at you with the calm remote regard of one whose life mostly goes on behind the eyes.

Fabio kissed his wife and then, bending his face toward the child, he made a frightful grimace and roared like a lion. It was all done in affection; but the poor little creature shrank away, terrified. Fabio laughed and pinched its ear.

"Don't tease him," said the Countess gently. "You'll make him cry."

Fabio turned to me. "That's what comes of leaving a boy to be looked after by women. He cries at everything. Let's come in," he added. "At present we use only two or three rooms on the ground floor and the kitchen in the basement. All the rest is deserted. I don't know how these old fellows managed to keep up their palaces. I can't." He shrugged his shoulders. Through a door on the right of the portico we passed into the house. "This is our drawing-room and dining room combined."

It was a fine big room, nobly proportioned—a double cube, I guessed—with doorways of sculptured marble and a magnificent fireplace flanked by a pair of nymphs on whose bowed shoulders rested a sloping overmantel carved with coats of arms and festoons of foliage. The furniture was strangely mixed. Round a sixteenth-century dining table that was a piece of Palladian architecture in wood, were ranged eight chairs in the Viennese Secession style of 1905. And then the pictures on the walls, the cretonnes with which the armchairs were covered! Tactfully, however, I admired everything, new as well as old.

"And now," said the Count, "for the frescoes."

I followed him through one of the marble-framed doorways and found myself at once in the great central hall of the villa. The Count turned round on

me. "There!" he said, smiling triumphantly with the air of one who has really succeeded in producing a rabbit out of an empty hat. And indeed, the spectacle was sufficiently astonishing.

The walls of the enormous room were completely covered with frescoes which it did not need much critical judgment or knowledge to perceive were genuine Veroneses. The authorship was obvious, palpable. Who else could have painted those harmoniously undulating groups of figures set in their splendid architectural frame? Who else but Veronese could have combined such splendor with such coolness, so much extravagant opulence with such exquisite suavity?

"*E grandioso!*" I said to the Count.

And indeed it was. Grandiose: there was no other word. A rich triumphal arcade ran all round the room, four or five arches appearing on each wall. Through the arches one looked into a garden; and there, against a background of cypresses and statues and far-away blue mountains, companies of Venetian ladies and gentlemen gravely disported themselves. Under one arch they were making music; through another one saw them sitting round a table, drinking one another's health in glasses of red wine, while a little blackamoor in a livery of green and yellow carried round the silver jug. In the next panel they were watching a fight between a monkey and a cat. On the opposite wall a poet was reading his verses to the assembled company, and next to him Veronese—the self-portrait was recognizable—stood at his easel, painting the picture of an opulent blonde in rose-colored satin. At the feet of the artist lay his dog; two parrots and a monkey were sitting on the marble balustrade in the middle distance.

I gazed with delight. "What a marvelous thing to possess!" I exclaimed, fairly carried away by my enthusiasm. "I envy you."

The Count made a little grimace and laughed. "Shall we come and look at the Tiepolos?" he asked.

We passed through a couple of cheer-

ful rooms by Carpioni, to step across a threshold into that brilliant universe, at once delicate and violently extravagant, wild and subtly orderly, which Tiepolo, in the last days of Italian painting, so masterfully and magically created. It was the story of Eros and Psyche, and the tale ran through three large rooms, spreading itself even on to the ceilings, where, in a pale sky dappled with white and golden clouds, the appropriate deities balanced themselves, diving or ascending through the empyrean.

Fabio had boasted to me that, in front of a picture, he could outstare any foreigner. But I was such a mortally long time admiring these dazzling phantasies that in the end he quite lost patience.

"I wanted to show you the farm before lunch," he said, looking at his watch. "There's only just time." I followed him reluctantly.

We looked at the cows, the horses, the prize bull, the turkeys. We looked at the tall thin haystacks, shaped like giant cigars set on end. The farm buildings were set round an immense courtyard. We had explored three sides of this piazza; now we came to the fourth, which was occupied by a long low building pierced with round archways and, I was surprised to see, completely empty.

"What's this?" I asked, as we entered.

"It is nothing," the Count replied. "But it might, some day, become . . . *chi sa?*" He stood there for a moment in silence, frowning pensively, with the expression of Napoleon on St. Helena, dreaming of the future, regretting past opportunities for ever lost. His freckled face, ordinarily a lamp for brightness, became incongruously somber. Then all at once he burst out—damning life, cursing fate, wishing to God he could get away and do something instead of wasting himself here. I listened, making every now and then a vague noise of sympathy. What could I do about it? And then, to my dismay, I found that I could do something about it, that I was

expected to do something. I was being asked to help the Count to sell his frescoes. As an artist, it was obvious I must be acquainted with rich patrons, museums, millionaires. I had seen the frescoes; I could honestly recommend them. And now there was this perfected process for transferring frescoes onto canvas. The walls could easily be peeled of their painting, the canvases rolled up and taken to Venice. And from there it would be the easiest thing in the world to smuggle them on board a ship and get away with them. As for prices—if he could get a million and a half of lire, so much the better; but he'd take a million, he'd even take three quarters. And he'd give me ten per cent commission. . . .

And afterward, when he'd sold his frescoes, what would he do? To begin with—the Count smiled at me triumphantly—he'd turn this empty building in which we were now standing into an up-to-date cheese factory. He could start the business handsomely on half a million and then, using cheap female labor from the country round, he could be almost sure of making big profits at once. And then, ah then, he'd be independent, he'd be able to get away, he'd see the world. He'd go to Brazil and the Argentine. An enterprising man with capital could always do well out there. He'd go to New York, to London, to Berlin, to Paris. There was nothing he could not do.

But meanwhile the frescoes were still on the walls, beautiful no doubt (for, the Count reminded me, he adored art), but futile; a huge capital frozen into the plaster, eating its head off, utterly useless. Whereas, with his cheese factory . . .

Slowly we walked back toward the house.

I was in Venice again in the September of the following year, 1913, and took the train for Padua.

I had not originally intended to see young Tirabassi again. I didn't know, indeed, how pleased he would be to see

me. For the frescoes, so far as I knew, were still safely on the walls, the cheese factory still remote in the future, in the imagination. I had written to him more than once, telling him that I was doing my best but that at the moment, etc., etc. But now, after all this lapse of time and nothing done, he might feel that I had let him down, deceived him somehow. That was why I took no steps to seek him out. But chance overruled my decision. On the third day of my stay in Padua, I ran into him in the street. Or rather he ran into me.

It was nearly six o'clock and I had strolled down to the Piazza del Santo. At that hour, when the slanting light is full of color and the shadows are long and profound, the great church, with its cupolas and turrets and campaniles, takes on an aspect more than ever fantastic and oriental. I had walked round the church and now I was standing at the foot of Donatello's statue, looking up at the grim bronze man, the ponderously stepping beast, when I suddenly became aware that some one was standing very close behind me. I took a step to one side and turned round. It was Fabio. He was gazing up at the statue, his mouth open in a vacant and fishlike gape. I burst out laughing.

"Did I look like that?" I asked.

"Precisely." He laughed too. "I've been watching you for the last ten minutes, mooning round the church. You English! Really . . ." He shook his head.

Together we strolled up the Via del Santo, talking as we went.

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to do anything about the frescoes," I said. "But really . . ." I entered into explanations.

"Some day, perhaps." Fabio was still optimistic.

"And how's the Countess?"

"Oh, she's very well," said Fabio. "considering. You know she had another son three or four months after you came to see us."

"No?"

"She's expecting another now." Fabio spoke rather gloomily, I thought. More than ever I admired the old Count's sagacity. But I was sorry for his son's sake that he had not a wider field in which to exercise his talents.

"And your father?" I asked. "Shall we find him sitting at Pedrochi's as usual?"

Fabio laughed. "We shall not," he said significantly. "He's flown."

"Flown?"

"Gone, vanished, disappeared."

"But where?"

"Who knows?" said Fabio. "My father is like the swallows; he comes and he goes. Every year. . . . But the migration isn't regular. Sometimes he goes away in the spring; sometimes it's the autumn, sometimes it's the summer. . . . One fine morning his man goes into his room to call him as usual, and he isn't there. Vanished. He might be dead. Oh, but he isn't." Fabio laughed. "Two or three months later in he walks again, as though he were just coming back from a stroll in the Botanical Gardens. 'Good evening. Good evening.'" Fabio imitated the old Count's voice and manner, snuffing the air like a war-horse, twisting the ends of an imaginary white mustache. "'How's your mother? How are the girls? How have the grapes done this year?' Snuff, snuff. 'How's Lucio? And who the devil has left all this rubbish lying about in my study?'" Fabio burst into an indignant roar that made the loiterers in the Via Roma turn, astonished, in our direction.

"And where does he go?" I asked.

"Nobody knows. My mother used to ask once. But she soon gave it up. It was no good. 'Where have you been, Ascanio?' 'My dear, I'm afraid the olive crop is going to be very poor this year.' Snuff, snuff. And when she pressed him he would fly into a temper and slam the doors. . . . What do you say to an *apéritif*?"

Pedrochi's open doors invited. We

entered, chose a retired table and sat down.

"But, what do you suppose the old gentleman does when he's away?"

"Ah!" And making the richly significant gesture I had so much admired in his father, the young Count laid his finger against his nose and slowly, solemnly winked his left eye.

"You mean . . . ?"

Fabio nodded. "There's a little widow here in Padua." With his extended finger the young Count described in the air an undulating line. "Nice and plump. Black eyes. I've noticed that she generally seems to be out of town just at the time the old man does his migrations. But it may, of course, be a mere coincidence." The waiter brought us our vermouth. Pensively the young Count sipped. The gayety went out of his open, lamplike face. "And meanwhile," he went on slowly and in an altered voice, "I stay here, looking after the estate, so that the old man can go running round the world with his little pigeon—*la sua colombella*." (The expression struck me as particularly choice.) "Oh, it's funny, no doubt," the young Count went on. "But it isn't right. If I wasn't married I'd go clean away and try my luck somewhere else. I'd leave him to look after everything himself. But with a wife and two children—three children soon—how can I take the risk? My only hope," he added after a little pause, "is in the frescoes."

Which implied, I reflected, that his only hope was in me; I felt sorry for him.

In the spring of 1914 I sent two rich Americans to look at Fabio's villa. Neither of them made any offer to buy the frescoes; it would have astonished me if they had. But Fabio was greatly encouraged by their arrival. "I feel," he wrote to me, "that a beginning has now been made. These Americans will go back to their country and tell their friends. Soon there will be a procession

of millionaires coming to see the frescoes. Meanwhile life is the same as ever. Rather worse, if anything. Our little daughter, whom we have christened Emilia, was born last month. My wife had a very bad time and is still far from well, which is very troublesome. The day before yesterday my father disappeared again. I have not yet had time to find out if the Colombella has also vanished. I have been going very carefully into the cheese-factory business lately, and I am not sure that it might not be more profitable to set up a silk-weaving establishment instead. When you next come I will go into details with you."

But it was a very long time before I saw Padua and the Count again. The war put an end to my yearly visits to Italy, and for various reasons even when it was over, I could not go south again as soon as I should have liked. Not till the autumn of 1921 did I embark again on the Venice express.

It was in an Italy not altogether familiar that I now found myself, an Italy full of violence and bloodshed. The Fascists and the Communists were still busy fighting. Roaring at the head of their dust storms, the motor lorries loaded with cargoes of singing boys careered across the country in search of adventure and lurking Bolshevism. One stood respectfully in the gutter while they passed; and through the flying dust, through the noises of the engine, a snatch of that singing would be blown back. "*Giorinezza, giorinezza, primavera di bellezza. . .*" Youth, youth, spring-time of beauty. Where but in Italy would they have put such words to a political song? And then the proclamations, the manifestoes, the denunciations, the appeals! I read them all with infinite pleasure.

I reached Pedrochi's at last. On the terrace, sitting in the very corner where I had seen him first, years before, was the old Count. He stared at me blankly when I saluted him, not recognizing me at all. I began to explain who I was;

after a moment he cut me short, almost impatiently, protesting that he remembered now, perfectly well. He invited me to sit at his table.

At a first glance from a distance, I fancied that the old Count had not aged a day since last I saw him. But I was wrong. From the street I had seen only the rakish tilt of his hat, the bristling of his white mustache and imperial, the parted knees, the noble protrusion of the paunch. But now that I could look at him closely and at leisure, I saw that he was, in fact, a very different man. Under the tilted hat his face was unhealthily purple; the flesh sagged into pouches. In the whites of his eyes, discolored and as though tarnished with age, the little broken veins showed red. And, lusterless, the eyes themselves seemed to look without interest at what they saw. His shoulders were bent as though under a weight and when he lifted his cup to his lips his hand trembled so much that a drop of coffee splashed onto the table. He was an old man now, and tired.

"How's Fabio?" I asked; since 1916 I had had no news of him.

"Oh, Fabio's well," the old Count answered, "Fabio's very well. He has six children now, you know." And the old gentleman nodded and smiled at me without a trace of malice. He seemed quite to have forgotten the reasons for which he had been at so much pains to select a good Catholic for a daughter-in-law. "Six," he repeated. "And then, you know, he did very well in the War. We Tirabassi have always been warriors." Full of pride, he went on to tell me of Fabio's exploits and sufferings. Twice wounded, special promotion on the field of battle, splendid decorations. He was a major now.

"And do his military duties still keep him in Padua?"

The old gentleman nodded and suddenly there appeared on his face something like the old smile. "A little *combinazione* of mine," he said and chuckled.

"And the estate?" I asked.

Oh, that was doing all right, everything considered. It had got rather out of hand during the War, while Fabio was at the front. And then afterward there had been a lot of trouble with the peasants; but Fabio and his Fascists were putting all that to rights. "With Fabio on the spot," said the old gentleman, "I have no anxieties." And then he began to tell me, all over again, about Fabio's exploits in the War.

The next day I took the tram to Strà, and after an hour agreeably spent in the villa and the park, I walked on at my leisure toward Dolo. The gates were open; I walked in. There stood the house, as grave and ponderous as ever, but shabbier than when I saw it last. The shutters needed painting and here and there the stucco was peeling off in scabs. I approached. From within the house came a cheerful noise of children's laughter and shouting. As I climbed the steps of the porch I could hear the sound of small feet racing over the tiled floors; in the empty rooms footsteps and shouting strangely echoed. And then suddenly, from the sitting room on the right, came the sound of Fabio's voice, furiously shouting, "Oh, for God's sake, keep those wretched children quiet." And then petulantly, it complained, "How do you expect me to do accounts with this sort of thing going on?" There was at once a profound and, as it were, unnatural silence; then the sound of small feet tiptoeing away, some whispering, a little nervous laugh. I rang the bell.

It was the Countess who opened the door. She stood for a moment hesitating, wondering who I was; then remembered, smiled, held out her hand. She had grown very thin, I noticed, and with the wasting of her face, her eyes seemed to have become larger. Their expression was as gentle and serene as ever; she seemed to be looking at me from a distance.

"Fabio will be delighted to see you," she said, and she took me through the

door on the right of the porch straight into the sitting room. Fabio was sitting at the Palladian table in front of a heap of papers, biting the end of his pencil.

Even in his gray-green service uniform the young Count looked wonderfully brilliant, like a soldier on the stage. His face was still boyishly freckled, but the skin was deeply lined; he looked very much older than when I had seen him last, older than he really was. The open cheerfulness, the shining lamplike brightness were gone. On his snubby-featured face he wore a ludicrously incongruous expression of chronic melancholy. He brightened, it is true, for a moment when I appeared; I think he was genuinely glad to see me.

"*Cas-pital*" he kept repeating, "*cas-pital*" (It was his favorite expression of astonishment, an old-fashioned word.) "Who would have thought it? After all this time!"

"And all the eternity of the War as well," I said.

But when the first ebullition of surprise and pleasure subsided, the look of melancholy came back.

"It gives me the spleen," he said, "to see you again, still traveling about, free to go where you like. If you knew what life was like here . . ."

"Well, in any case," I said, "the War's over, and you have escaped a real revolution. That's something."

"Oh, you're as bad as Laura," said the Count impatiently. He looked toward his wife, as though hoping that she would say something. But the Countess went on with her sewing without even looking up. The Count took my arm. "Come along," he said, and his tone was almost one of anger. "Let's take a turn outside." His wife's religious resignation, her patience, her serenity angered him, I could see, like a reprimand.

Along the weed-grown paths of what had once, in the ancient days of splendor, been the garden, slowly we walked toward the farm. A few ragged box bushes grew along the fringes of the paths; once

there had been neat hedges. Poised over a dry basin, a Triton blew his waterless conch.

"I saw your father yesterday," I said. "He looks aged."

"And so he ought," said Fabio murderously. "He's sixty-nine."

I felt uncomfortably that the subject had become too serious for light conversation. I had wanted to ask after the Colombella; in the circumstances I decided that it would be wiser to say nothing about her. We were walking now under the lee of the farm buildings.

"The cows look very healthy," I said, politely, looking through an open doorway. In the twilight within, six gray rumps plastered with dry dung presented themselves in file; six long leather tails swished impatiently from side to side. Fabio made no comment; he only grunted.

"In any case," he went on slowly, after another silence, "he can't live much longer. I shall sell my share and clear off to South America, family or no family." It was a threat against his own destiny of which he must have known the vanity. He was deceiving himself to keep up his spirits.

"But I say," I exclaimed, taking another and better opportunity to change the conversation, "I see you have started a factory here after all." We had walked round to the farther side of the square. Through the windows of the long low building which, at my last visit, had stood untenanted, I saw the complicated shapes of machines, rows of them in a double line down the whole length of the building. "Looms? Then you decided against cheese? And the frescoes?" I turned questioningly toward the Count. I had a horrible fear that, when we got back to the house, I should find the great hall peeled of its Veroneses and a blank of plaster where once had been the history of Eros and Psyche.

"Oh, the frescoes are still there, what's left of them." And in spite of Fabio's long face, I was delighted at the news.

"I persuaded my father to sell some of his house property in Padua and we started this weaving business here two years ago. Just in time," Fabio added, "for the communist revolution."

Poor Fabio, he had no luck. The peasants had seized his factory and had tried to possess themselves of his land. For three weeks he had lived at the villa in a state of siege, defending the place, with twenty Fascists to help him, against all the peasants of the countryside. The danger was over now; but the machines were broken and, in any case, it was out of the question to start them again, feeling was still too high.

"And they were such beautiful machines," said Fabio, pausing for a moment to look in at the last of the long line of windows. "Whether to sell them, whether to wait till all this has blown over and have them put right and try to start again—I don't know." He shrugged his shoulders hopelessly. "Or just let things slide till the old man dies." We turned the corner of the square and began to walk back toward the house. "Somehow," he added after a silence, "I don't believe he ever will die."

The children were playing in the great hall of the Veroneses. The majestic double doors which gave onto the portico were ajar; through the opening we watched them for a moment without being seen. The family was formed up in order of battle. A red-headed boy of ten or eleven years led the van, a brown boy followed. Then came three little girls, diminishing regularly in size like graded pearls; and finally a little toddling creature in blue-linen crawlers. All six of them carried shouldered bamboos, and they were singing in ragged unison to a kind of trumpet call of three notes: "*All'armi i Fascisti; a morte i Communisti; a basso i Socialisti*," over and over again. And as they sang they marched, round and round, earnestly, indefatigably. The huge empty room echoed like a swimming bath. Remote under their triumphal arches, in their serene world of fantastic beauty the

silken ladies and gentlemen played their music, drank their wine; the poet declaimed, the painter poised his brush before the canvas, the monkeys clambered among the Roman ruins, the parrots dozed on the balustrades. "*All'armi i Fascisti; a morte i Communisti. . .*" I should have liked to stand there in silence, merely to see how long the children would continue their patriotic march. But Fabio, after indulging me for a moment with the spectacle, pushed open the door and walked in. The children looked round and were immediately silent. What with his bad temper and his theory of education by teasing, they seemed to be thoroughly frightened of their father.

"Go on," he said, "go on." But they wouldn't; they obviously couldn't in his terrifying presence. Unobtrusively, they slipped away.

Fabio led me round the painted room. "Look here," he said, "and look here." In one of the walls of the great hall there were half a dozen bullet holes. A chip had been taken off one of the painted cornices; one lady was horribly wounded in the face; there were two or three holes in the landscape and a monkey's tail was severed. "That's our friends the peasants," Fabio explained.

The tale of Eros and Psyche had suffered dreadfully. The exquisite panel in which Tiepolo had painted Psyche holding up the lamp to look at her mysterious lover was no more than a faint mildewy smudge. And where once the indignant young god had flown upward to rejoin his Olympian relatives (who still, fortunately, swam about intact among the clouds on the ceiling) there was nothing but the palest ghost of an ascending Cupid, while Psyche weeping on the earth below was now quite invisible.

"That's our friends the French," said Fabio. "They were quartered here in 1918, and they didn't trouble to shut the windows when it rained."

Poor Fabio! Everything against him. I had no consolation to offer. That

autumn I sent him an art critic and three more Americans. But nothing came of their visits. The fact was that he had too much to offer. A picture—that might easily have been disposed of. But what could one do with a whole housefull of paintings like this?

The months passed. About Easter-time of the next year I had another letter from Fabio. The olive crop had been poor. The Countess was expecting another baby and was far from well. The two eldest children were down with measles and the last but one had what the Italians call an "asinine cough." He expected all the children to catch both diseases in due course. He was very doubtful now if it would ever be worth while to restart his looms. The old Count was aging rapidly; when Fabio saw him last he had told the same anecdote three times in the space of ten minutes. With these two pieces of good news—they were for him, I imagine, the only bright spots in the surrounding gloom—Fabio closed his letter. I was left wondering why he troubled to write to me at all. It may be that he got a certain lacerating satisfaction by thus enumerating his troubles.

That August there was a musical festival in Salzburg, and one afternoon I took the funicular up to the castle. There is a beer-terrace under the walls of the fortress from which you get a view that is starred in Baedeker. Below you on one side lies the town, spread out in the curving valley, with a river running through it, like a small and German version of Florence. From the other side of the terrace you look out over a panorama that makes no pretence to Italianism; it is as sweetly and romantically German as an air out of Weber's *Freischütz*. There are mountains on the horizon, spiky and blue like mountains in a picture book; and in the foreground, extending to the very foot of the extremely improbable crag on which the castle and the beer garden are perched, stretches a flat green plain—miles upon miles of juicy meadows dotted with

minusculous cows, with here and there a neat toy farm or, more rarely, a cluster of doll's houses with a spire going up glittering from the midst of them.

I was sitting with my blond beer in front of this delicious and slightly comical landscape, thinking comfortably of nothing in particular, when I heard behind me a rapturous voice exclaiming, "*Bello, bello!*" I looked round curiously—for it seemed to me somehow rather surprising to hear Italian spoken here—and saw one of those fine sumptuous women they admire so much in the South. She was a "*bella grassa*," plump to the verge of overripeness and perilously near middle age; but still in her way exceedingly handsome. Her face had the proportions of an iceberg—one fifth above water, four fifths below. Ample and florid from the eyes downward, it was almost foreheadless; the hair began immediately above the brows. The eyes themselves were dark, large, and for my taste, at least, somewhat excessively tender in expression. I took her in in a moment and was about to look away again when her companion, who had been looking at the view on the other side, turned round. It was the old Count.

I was far more embarrassed, I believe, than he. I felt myself blushing as our eyes met, as though it were I who had been traveling about the world with a Colombella and he who had caught me in the act. But the old Count put an end to my irresolution by calling out my name in astonishment, by running up to me and seizing my hand. What a delight to see an old friend! Here of all places! He would introduce me to a charming compatriot of his own, an Italian lady he had met yesterday in the train from Vienna.

I was made known to the Colombella and we all sat down at my table. Speaking resolutely in Italian, the Count ordered two more beers. We talked. Or rather the Count talked; for the conversation was a monologue. He told us

anecdotes of the Italy of fifty years ago; he gave us imitations of the queer characters he had known; he even, at one moment, imitated the braying of an ass—I forget in what context; but the braying remains vividly in my memory. Snuffing the air between sentences, he gave us his views on women. The Colombella screamed indignant protests, dissolved herself in laughter. The old Count twisted his mustaches, twinkling at her through the network of his wrinkles. Every now and then he turned in my direction and gave me a little wink.

I listened in astonishment. Was this the man who had told the same anecdote three times in ten minutes? I looked at the old Count. He was leaning toward the Colombella, whispering something in her ear which made her laugh so much that she had to wipe the tears from her eyes. Turning away from her, he caught my eye; smiling, he shrugged his shoulders as though to say, "These women! What imbeciles, but how delicious, how indispensable!" Was this the tired old man I had seen a year ago sitting on Pedrochi's terrace? It seemed incredible.

"Well, good-by, *a rivederci*." They had to get down into the town again. The funicular was waiting.

"I'm delighted to have seen you,"

said the old Count, shaking me affectionately by the hand.

"And so am I," I protested. "Particularly delighted to see you so well."

"Yes, I'm wonderfully well, now," he said, blowing out his chest.

"And young," I went on. "Younger than I am! How have you done it?"

"Aha!" The old Count cocked his head on one side mysteriously.

More in joke than in earnest, "I believe you've been seeing Steinach in Vienna," I said. "Having a rejuvenating operation."

For all reply, the old Count raised the forefinger of his right hand, laying it first to his lips, then along the side of his nose, and winking as he did so. Then clenching his fist and with his thumb sticking rigidly up, he made a complicated gesture which would, I am sure, for an Italian, have been full of a profound and vital significance. To me, however, unfamiliar with the language of signs, the exact meaning was not entirely clear. But the Count offered no verbal explanation. Still without uttering a word, he raised his hat; then laying his finger once more to his lips, he turned and ran with an astonishing agility down the steep path toward the little carriage of the funicular, in which the Colombella had already taken her seat.



SAMPANS AND PRAHAUS AT A BATAVIA QUAY

Rice and Volcanoes

BY H. M. TOMLINSON

JAVA was a serious disappointment some time before I saw it. The gorgeous East obviously could not be and ought not to be so gorgeous as its holiday posters. These are in the style of the loudest Swiss art. "Come to Java!" Not at all. Not while the East Indies are so spacious, and have so many other islands; not if Java is like its posters. What sense is there in the East calling itself mysterious when it advertises itself with the particularity of a Special Motor Supplement? I felt I ought to keep away from Java. I wanted to leave it to those who enjoy traveling round the earth in eighty days, and who see all the wonders of it from a cabin window of a twin-screw composite restaurant and tennis court. The fact that some important people even while at sea feel the mind growing slack when withdrawn from the resources of the bridge table and the golf course,

is probably at the bottom of the world's more violent forms of Bolshevism. But Java stood in the way of my coasting steamer, which had to call at every port, and at some places which are not ports but merely wish they were, along the north coast of it. This hindrance had to be endured for the privilege of seeing the outer islands, the lesser Sundus and the Moluccas, those unimportant beaches which will have no posters of their own, thank God and the fevers, for some time to come.

Our first Javan port was Tanjong Priok, the harbor for Batavia. There the mosquitoes came aboard in hosts so ravenous that they tried to bite their way into the cabins, and so stuck to the new paint. I abandoned the ship. Java may be a perfectly healthy island, and malaria there—as one is led to infer—as rare and inconsequential as falling upstairs; but the ship's new paint scared