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Jettatura

Chapter 1

THE *LEOPOLD*, A SUPERB TUSCAN STEAMBOAT which sailed between Marseilles and Naples, had just rounded the tip of Procida.* The passengers were all out on deck, cured of their seasickness by the sight of land – a more effective cure than Malta sweets and other prescriptions used in such cases.

On the deck in the enclosure reserved for first-class passengers stood several Englishmen endeavouring to keep as far away from each other as possible and to draw around themselves an impassable circular boundary – their splenetic faces were carefully shaved; their neckties were perfectly free of creases; their stiff white shirt collars resembled the corners of sheets of Bristol paper; fresh clean suede gloves were on their hands, and Lord Elliot's veneer gleamed on their brand-new shoes. They might have emerged from one of the compartments of their travel bags; in their correct outfits were none of the minor traces of untidiness that are the ordinary consequence of travelling. Among them were lords, MPs, City merchants, Regent's Street tailors and Sheffield cutlers – all respectable, all grave, all immobile, all bored. There was no lack of women either, for Englishwomen are not sedentary like the women of other countries, and take advantage of the slightest pretext to leave their island. Next to the young ladies and the married women – autumnal beauties with blotchy, streaked skins – there glowed, beneath their veils of blue gauze, young misses with strawberries-and-cream complexions, shining coils of blond hair and long, white teeth, recalling the types popular in memento books, and proving that English engravings are innocent of the charge of dishonesty that is so often levelled against them. These charming persons were modulating, independently of each other, in the most delightful British accent, the sacramental phrase: "*Vedi Napoli e poi mori*",* consulting their travel guides or jotting down their impressions in their notebooks, without paying the least

attention to the Don Juanesque winks of several self-satisfied Parisians who were prowling round them, while their irritated mamas murmured in low voices about French impropriety.

On the periphery of the aristocratic quarter, three or four young men were strolling about, smoking cigars. It was easy to recognize them, from their straw or grey-felt hats, their short bag jackets studded with broad horn buttons and their huge drill trousers, as artists – an indication confirmed by their Van Dyck moustaches, their hair, curled like that of a Rubens model, or their crew cuts, like those of a Paolo Veronese; they were trying, but with quite another aim in view than the dandies, to capture the profiles of a few of those beauties whom their lack of fortune prevented from approaching, and this preoccupation distracted them somewhat from the magnificent panorama spread out before their eyes.

At the ship's prow, leaning against the rail or sitting on bundles of coiled rope, were groups of the poor third-class travellers, finishing off the provisions that their seasickness had left untouched, and not deigning to glance at the most admirable spectacle in the world. A feeling for nature is the privilege of cultivated minds not entirely absorbed in the material necessities of life.

The weather was fine; the blue waves unfurled in broad pleats, with hardly enough strength to erase the wake left by the boat; the smoke from the stack, forming the sole cloud in this splendid sky, slowly wafted away in light fleecy tufts, and the paddles of the wheels, thrashing round in a diamond haze on which the sun draped little rainbows, churned the water with joyful vigour, as if aware of the proximity of the harbour.

The long line of hills which, from Posillipo to Vesuvius, delineates the marvellous gulf at the head of which Naples reposes like a sea nymph drying herself on the shore after her swim was starting to show more clearly its violet undulations, and stood out more sharply from the dazzling blue of the sky; already a few white spots, piercing the dark landscape of the fields, betrayed the presence of villas scattered through the countryside. Sails of fishing boats returning to port were gliding over the smooth blue

water like swans' feathers drifting in the breeze, a sign of human activity on the majestic solitude of the sea.

After a few rotations of the paddle wheel, the outlines of the Castel Sant'Elmo and the San Martino monastery came distinctly into view at the summit of the mountain on which Naples rests, above the domes of the churches, the terraces of the hotels, the roofs of the houses, the façades of the palaces and the greenery of the gardens, all still only vaguely sketched in the luminous haze. Soon the Castel dell'Ovo, squatting on its foam-washed reef, seemed to advance towards the steamboat, and the pier with its lighthouse stretched out like an arm holding a torch.

At the extremity of the bay, Vesuvius, now closer, exchanged the bluish tints in which distance had swathed it for more energetic and solid tones; its flanks showed the furrows of ravines and solidified lava flows, and from its truncated cone, as if from the holes in an incense burner, there emerged, clearly visible, small jets of white smoke that a light breeze dispersed.

The boat came into sight of the Chiatamone, Pizzofalcone, the quay of Santa Lucia lined by hotels, the Palazzo Reale with its rows of balconies, the Palazzo Nuovo flanked by its *moucharaby* towers,* the Arsenal and ships of every nation, their masts and spars jostling like the trees of a wood stripped of its leaves. Just then, from his cabin emerged a passenger who had not showed himself once during the whole crossing, either because seasickness had confined him to his berth or because he was too antisocial to wish to mingle with the rest of the travellers, or else because this spectacle, new to most of them, had been familiar to him for a long time and offered him no further interest.

He was a young man of between twenty-six and twenty-eight – or at least that was the age you were tempted to ascribe to him at first glance, for when you looked at him more attentively you found him either younger or older, to such an extent was his enigmatic expression a mixture of freshness and fatigue. His dark blond hair was that shade of colour the English call “auburn”, and in the sunlight it blazed with a coppery, metallic sheen, while in

the shade it appeared almost black; his profile was composed of cleanly drawn lines: a forehead with such protuberances as would have attracted the admiration of a phrenologist, a nobly curving aquiline nose, finely moulded lips and a powerfully rounded chin reminiscent of ancient medals. And yet all these features, handsome in themselves, did not add up to an attractive whole. They lacked that mysterious harmony which smooths out the contours and blends them together. Legend speaks of an Italian painter who, wishing to depict the rebel archangel, composed for him a mask of dissonant beauties, and thus achieved an effect of terror much greater than if he had resorted to horns, circumflex eyebrows and a grinning mouth. The stranger's face produced an effect of this kind. His eyes in particular were extraordinary; the black lashes that bordered them contrasted with the light-grey colour of his irises and the burnt-brown tones of his hair. The thinness of the bones in his nose made these eyes seem set more closely together than the proportions established by the principles of drawing allow – and their expression was quite indefinable. When they were gazing into space, a vague melancholy, a fondly lethargic expression could be read in them, and they had a moist gleam; if they focused on any person or object, the brows came together, contracted, and carved a perpendicular crease in the skin of his forehead: his irises, turning from grey to green, became speckled with black spots and streaked with yellow fibrils; his gaze flashed from them, piercing and almost wounding; then all resumed its initial placidity, and this character with his Mephistophelean appearance turned back into a young man of the world – a member of the Jockey Club, if you like – going to spend the season at Naples, and happy to set foot on lava paving stones less likely to rise and fall than the deck of the *Leopold*.

His clothes were elegant without drawing attention to themselves by any showiness of detail: a dark-blue frock coat, a black polka-dot cravat whose knot was tied in a manner neither affected nor negligent, a waistcoat of the same design as the cravat and light-grey trousers, beneath which was a fine pair of boots; the

chain holding his watch was all of gold, and his pince-nez dangled from a cord of flat silk; his hand, elegantly gloved, was tapping a small slender cane in twisted vine stock, tipped with ornamental silver.

He strolled a few paces along the deck, allowing his gaze to wander vaguely towards the approaching shore, along which carriages rolled through the swarming populace. Stationed here and there stood groups of idlers, for whom the arrival of a stagecoach or a steamboat is always an interesting and novel spectacle, even though they have gazed at it a thousand times before.

Already a squadron of dinghies and rowing boats was launching out from the quay, preparing to assault the *Leopold*, laden with crews of hotel waiters, domestic staff, *facchini** and other various kinds of riff-raff who tend to view foreigners as their prey; each boat was rowing its hardest to get there first, and the mariners, as was their custom, exchanged insults and vociferous shouts capable of alarming anyone unacquainted with the manners of the Neapolitan lower class.

The young man with auburn hair had set his double pince-nez on his nose in order to see more clearly the scene unfolding before him, but his attention, distracted from the sublime spectacle of the bay by the concert of cries and complaints rising from the flotilla, focused on the dinghies – doubtless he found the noise disturbing, for his brows contracted, the crease in his forehead deepened and the grey of his eyes took on a yellow hue.

An unexpected wave, sweeping along from the open sea, fringed with foam, passed under the steamboat – which it lifted and then dropped heavily – and broke against the quay in millions of points of glittering light, drenching the strollers, who were taken completely by surprise at this sudden shower. The violence of its backwash made the boats clash so violently against one another that three or four *facchini* fell into the water. The accident was not serious, as those rascals can all swim like fish or sea gods, and a few seconds later they reappeared, their hair plastered across their foreheads, spitting out the salty water through their

mouths and blowing it through their nostrils, just as astonished by their sudden dip, no doubt, as Telemachus, son of Ulysses, must have been when Minerva, in the shape of the wise Mentor, threw him from a rock into the sea so as to wrest him from the love of Eucharis.*

Behind the strange traveller, at a respectful distance, next to a great heap of travelling trunks, stood a little groom, a fifteen-year-old boy who already looked like an old man, a gnome in livery, resembling those dwarf trees that the patient Chinese cultivate in vases to prevent them growing; his flat face, in which the nose hardly stuck out at all, seemed to have been squashed in infancy, and his prominent eyes had that mildness which certain naturalists find in the eyes of a toad. His shoulders were not hunched or rounded, and his chest did not protrude – and yet he made you think of a hunchback, though you would have searched in vain for his hump. In short, he was a very respectable groom, who would have been able without further training to present himself at the Ascot or Chantilly races; any gentleman rider would have accepted him because of his ill-favoured appearance. He was unattractive, but irreproachable in his kind, just like his master.

The passengers disembarked; the porters, after more than Homeric exchanges of insults, divided the foreigners and their baggage up between them and set off for the different hotels with which Naples is abundantly provided.

The traveller with the pince-nez and his groom made their way to the Hotel Roma, followed by a large phalanx of robust *facchini*, who pretended to pant and sweat under the weight of a hatbox or a light carton, hoping naively for a more generous tip, while five or six of their comrades, flexing muscles as powerful as those of the statue of Hercules you can admire at the Studii,* pushed along a handcart in which two trunks of ordinary size and moderate weight bounced around.

When they had reached the door of the hotel and the *padron di casa** had designated to the new arrival the apartment he was to occupy, the porters, although they had received about three times

the price of their errand, broke out into frenetic gesticulations and speeches, in which the formulas of supplication were mixed with threats in the most comical proportions; they all spoke at once, with alarming volubility, demanding a larger tip and swearing by their great gods that they had not been sufficiently recompensed for their labours.

Paddy, left alone to confront them – for his master, without bothering about this din, had already climbed the stairs – resembled a monkey surrounded by a pack of baying mastiffs; trying to calm this tumultuous hullabaloo, he harangued them for a short while in his mother tongue – that is, English. The harangue had little effect. So, clenching his fists and raising his arms up to chest height, he quite accurately adopted the pose of a boxer, to the loud hilarity of the *facchini* – and with a straight jab worthy of Adams or Tom Cribb,* and aiming right at the pit of the stomach, he sent the giant of the band tumbling backwards, arms and legs in the air, onto the lava paving stones of the street.

This exploit put the troop to flight; the colossus picked himself up heavily, quite shaken by his fall – and, without trying to take his revenge on Paddy, he went off, rubbing the bluish bruise that was starting to spread its rainbow hues across his skin, and grimacing, convinced that a demon must be lurking under the jacket of that ugly monkey, who looked as if the only animal he would be good at riding was not a horse, but a dog. He had imagined that a mere breath should have been enough to flatten him!

The stranger, having summoned the *padron di casa*, asked him whether a letter addressed to Monsieur Paul d’Aspremont had been delivered to the Hotel Roma; the hotelier replied that a letter bearing that inscription had indeed been waiting for a week in his pigeon-hole, and he hurried off to retrieve it.

The letter, enclosed in a thick envelope of azure cream-laid paper sealed with aventurine wax,* was written in that hand (angular down-strokes and cursive up-strokes) which denotes a high level of aristocratic education, and which young English ladies of good family all possess – a little too uniformly, perhaps.

This is what the letter, opened by M. d'Aspremont with a haste motivated perhaps by more than just curiosity, said:

MY DEAR MR PAUL,

We have been in Naples for two months. During the journey, which we carried out in short stages, my uncle complained bitterly of the heat, the mosquitoes, the wine, the butter and the beds; he swore that one must be completely mad to leave a comfortable cottage a few miles from London and travel along dusty roads bordered by detestable inns, where not even your good old English dogs would consent to spend the night; but as he grouched, he kept me company, and I would have taken him to the ends of the earth; he is none the worse for it, and I am much better.

We are staying on the coast, in a whitewashed house buried in a sort of virgin forest of orange trees, lemon trees, myrtles, oleanders and other kind of exotic vegetation. From the terrace we enjoy a marvellous view, and every evening you will find a cup of tea ready for you here, or an iced lemonade, whichever you prefer. My uncle, whom you managed to fascinate, I don't know how, will be delighted to shake your hand. Need I add that your maidservant will not be annoyed either, although you cut her fingers with your ring when bidding her farewell on the jetty at Folkestone?

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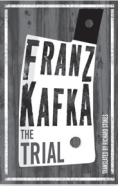
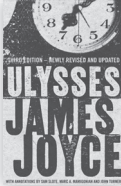
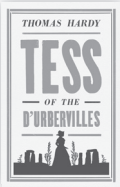
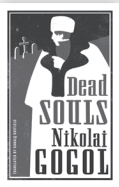
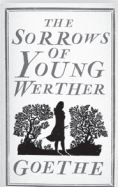
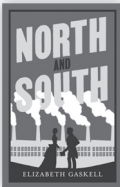
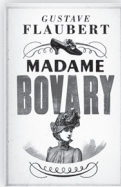
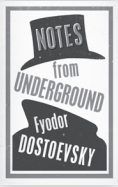
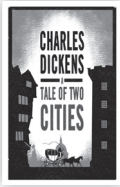
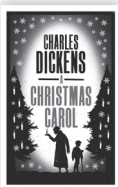


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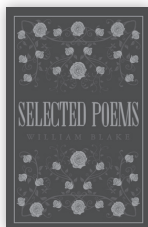
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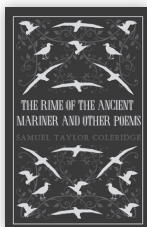
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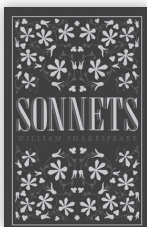
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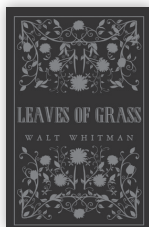
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