



A BAD COIN ALWAYS TURNS UP

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A bad coin always turns up  
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My special thanks to  
**Professor Katherine M. Clifton**  
for the superbe revision and translation  
from the original italian text to english

*To Carlo who did not have time to read it*

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*This novel was conceived as a light-hearted joke played on a person by the same name as the protagonist who, in my mind, should have received the first copy, reading it and laughing aloud. Unfortunately, an untimely accident took him from us and I am now certain that, using one of those special telescopes they have up there, he was able to look over my shoulder and read it as I wrote.*

*Many of the historical events mentioned are real, although freely interpreted. The same is true for the historical characters, who I hope will not be offended.*

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## PART ONE

### *The Fortress of San Leo – 1625*

Ten months earlier Alfonso Benassi had passed under the portcullis of the imposing fortress perched on the sheer rock-face. Even from a distance, it conveyed the oppressive sensation that it would be impossible to leave or to enter without crossing the drawbridge that isolated it from the world.

He had been betrayed and doomed by his skill in handling the burins, with which he engraved the steel blanks used to produce coins. His last job, the one that had led to his disagreeable and obligatory sojourn, involved the counterfeiting of papal coins of high value, commissioned by a cardinal from Modena, who to protect himself had not hesitated to place all the blame on Benassi.

In effect, he was not treated severely, although his health had suffered; but it was still imprisonment and isolation.

Nonetheless, his singular ability had not escaped the sharp eyes of the rectors of the Banco di Santo Spirito, the exchequer of the Vatican set up by Pope Paul V just a few years earlier. This was why, in exchange for his services, he was guaranteed superior treatment, even though he shared accommodation that had little to do with a jail cell.

It was not clear whether it was a deliberate choice, or the carelessness of the Vatican guards, but his fellow detainee was one Gregorio Molinazzi, a short, puny, elderly man with rheumy eyes, and a bushy grey beard. He had been imprisoned on a charge of immoral conduct, however, the truth was, that, in addition to being skilled in recognising medicinal herbs, which he used to treat the people, he had a not unwarranted reputation as an alchemist. For this reason, the cardinal (the cardinal who had jailed Benassi) had detained him, nurturing the not particularly secret hope that he would provide him with the formula for

*lapis philosophorum*, the philosopher's stone: that which, in the cardinal's dreams, would transform stones into gold.

During the long evenings spent in incessant conversation, Alfonso spoke nostalgically of his wife and his young son, whom he had been forced to abandon in Guastalla, while Gregorio, a little at a time, began to reveal to his companion his previous experiences in alchemy. Experiments that had begun with a study of curative herbs and minerals and inevitably led to the obsessive search for the first phase of the alchemic process, the *Opus Nigrum*, through which all the forms are lost and the elements dissociated. The *Opus Nigrum* gives access to the second phase of alchemic research, called *Albedum*, which in turn leads to the purification of matter.

Unfortunately, the long nights that Gregorio had spent seeking the solution had not given tangible results and the only thing he had accumulated was a backlog of lost sleep. During his lengthy and incessant research he had come across anomalous substances, some decidedly useless because they were unstable, others with characteristics so unusual that it was impossible to identify a possible application. So it was that Alfonso became aware of a substance, amongst the many that Gregorio had handled, that struck him for the absolute impossibility of bringing it to melting point. In fact, he had only been able, using a rasp and a pumice stone to obtain a very fine powder. The Spanish, who had brought it from the East Indies, contemptuously called it *platina*, or 'little silver' because it looked like silver and since they had not found any practical uses for it, they valued it so little that it was often thrown away. Alfonso and Gregorio spent long days trying to amalgamate that powder with gold, because Alfonso had suspected that this substance, so heavy and so cheap, could offer particularly interesting opportunities.

One year after he was captured, Alfonso Benassi received a visit from a young prelate, Monsignor Giulio Gabrielli, who made him a proposal that in effect he could not refuse: he could either work for the church in a more dignified setting, where his family could join him, or to remain in the fortress for the rest of his

days.

It only took Alfonso a few seconds to accept the offer and within a week, just the time it took to journey from Guastalla, his wife and son arrived. He said goodbye to the venerable Gregorio who, on the whole, was content at the fortress, because he could continue his research undisturbed.

For their protection, but above all to prevent them from trying to flee, Alfonso and his family travelled in a wagon accompanied by a troop of armigers on their journey along the great River Po to Pavia and from there, on mules, they continued to Novara. Later they traversed the territory of the Duke of Milano, reaching their final destination, a pontifical fiefdom raised to the rank of principality: the Principality of Masserano and Crevacuore. The commander of the troops was received by Prince Ferrero to whom he delivered both the travellers and a letter from the Archbishop of Bologna, Cardinal Ludovisi, with all the necessary instructions on how to make the best use of Benassi's skills.

The Principality of Masserano boasted the ancient privilege, later confirmed by the Pope, of being allowed to mint coins, a dispensation that was exploited in a manner somewhat less than crystal clear, since that letter with the order to utilise 'shrewdly' the talents of Benassi seemed to Prince Ferrero a gift from heaven.

### *Masserano – 1636*

The burin skimmed the coin as Alfonso Benassi, engraver and minter to the Prince Paolo Besso Ferrero worked with his usual dexterity.

Alfonso cost the prince little or nothing in wages, since the well-deserved compensation for his craftsmanship came from another source – a percentage, agreed with the Prince, of the precious metal that he was able to save when minting the coins for the Principality.

It was a strange story, that of the Principality of Masserano: a diminutive state, situated on the border between the Dukedoms of Milano and of Savoy. By a strange twist of fate, in the distant twelfth century, it had been authorised by the

Emperor Federico I Barbarossa to mint coins and years later had continued to maintain this privilege thanks to a papal bull, which also transformed the Principality into a papal feud.

The coinage of Masserano, let's take a gold florin as an example, was essentially correct, since it was legal issue of the Principality and it could be exchanged with other florins, but these coins had the curious characteristic of weighing less than the florins generally circulating, either because they were smaller, or because they were thinner.

An imprudent merchant who accepted them in payment for goods, soon found it necessary to pass them on (and this was truly at his own risk) when making purchases or worse still in exchange for other currency.

In fact, the moneychangers were known for their lack of a sense of humour, and while their bodyguards were much more inclined to joking, they preferred practical jokes and were heavy-handed, above all in the case of anyone coming to their employer with counterfeit money.

The Fieschi princes first, and later the Ferrero, had been specialising in this curious form of legal fraud for centuries and they proclaimed their innocence, declaring that their coins had precisely *these* characteristics and not others. They also insisted that, after all, it was the duty of the person who received them to ascertain whether there were any differences and finally to decide whether to accept them or not.

In any case, the coins, despite the bad reputation that accompanied them, were not strictly speaking counterfeits. They did not copy, using false metal, those of other states, they simply reproduced their appearance and their most characteristic traits, taking great care, however, that every word, every symbol they carried, even the portrait on the obverse of the coins referred to the prince of Masserano. The quantity of precious metal in them was not declared, so that, although it was always less than that of the similar coins that inspired them, it could not be seen as an irregularity.

Alfonso Benassi was working in a little room in a niche of the castle tower



housing the mint. He had created the room himself, with the help of his son Jacopo; it was hidden behind a fake wall to form a room that only they knew about. Even the Prince ignored its existence.

He had created that refuge for his personal jobs. Other minters were content to earn their wages by saving gold or silver that they later sold on, Benassi on the other hand used that metal to produce, limited editions of coins or medals of very high value, perfect in form, but defective in the gold content. Thanks to the knowledge he had gained years earlier from the alchemist Gregorio Molinazzi, while they were imprisoned in the fortress of San Leo, he was able to mix with the gold and the copper a third mineral which, being particularly heavy, allowed the metal to maintain the appearance and the weight of pure gold; despite the fact that the quantity of gold used was in truth barely seventy per cent.

Using that process, he had melted and then scraped to the correct weight the blanks necessary for the next stage of minting the coins. For the first tests, he had minted florins, which he had then exchanged, with the help of an innocent accomplice, for silver coins at the exchange bank of Moisé Benin, who was considered by all the Lombardy merchants to be one of the most 'troublesome' moneychangers in Milano.

Having passed this test, he undertook the most ambitious phase of his project, the realisation of a work commissioned by an important personage; don Guillermo Ardiles, captain of the Spanish Armada in Milano, who often came to Masserano to do business directly with Prince Besso Ferrero.

Captain Ardiles was the head of a special spy corps that aimed to harm the enemy by introducing counterfeit coins into their territories. The coins were made at the various mints with a poor reputation, which abounded in the plains of the Po Valley, and amongst them was the mint of the Principality of Masserano.

Unknown to prince Ferrero, the captain had asked Alfonso Benassi to reproduce the gold ten *scudi* coin of the Duke Vittorio Amedeo of Savoy. This was a special, uncirculated coin, since its value was too high to be normally used for

commercial exchanges. Like other coins or medallions of similar prestige, the ten *scudi* coin was destined to be used in exchanges of gifts between the ambassadors of the reigning courts.

The peculiarity of the reproduction, of which only ten pieces were to be made, was that they would be similar to the original, at least in appearance. The diversity would lie in the addition of small details, difficult for anyone to see, unless they had the attentive and well-trained eye of the Holy Inquisition. These minute details consisted of miniscule alchemic references that would, in the intention of the Spanish court, discredit or at least misrepresent the Duke of Savoy before the Pope.

Alfonso Benassi had never handled the prestigious ten gold *scudi* coin and Captain Ardiles procured a copy for him, in the form of a wax mould: there was good reason why he was the head of the secret services of the Dukedom of Milano.

Alfonso had meticulously reproduced the designs taken from the wax mould on two steel blanks and then he had added to the Duke's collar and inside his crest, the minute signs that Captain Ardiles had requested.

The finishing touch, which obviously was not communicated to the captain, was his own. Rather than using twenty-two carat gold, he used his own special mixture, which contained less, much less, gold.

"Jacopo," he said to his son, "take the silver blanks, the big ones."

He had already tested the accuracy of the coinage using lead blanks, but now he wanted to check the result on a more noble material.

He set the silver disc on the lower die that acted as an anvil and then placed the second die precisely and carefully on top of it. This acted as the stamp and would soon receive the hammer blow.

"Watch the hand that holds the pieces still: it must not move!" he said to Jacopo, who was observing and memorising his father's every single movement.

"Then hold your breath and raise the hammer: you must give a single blow, with no hesitation, like this!"

The hammer fell with a sharp crack.

He separated the dies, took out the coin and they both examined it carefully.

“What do you think?” asked Alfonso.

“The sign you have added to the crest looks a bit too obvious, don’t you think?” asked Jacopo after a moment’s hesitation.

“No, no... or rather, yes, you are right. If you look at it from the side, it is too evident. Go on, correct it.”

“M...me?” asked Jacopo amazed.

“Yes, you. At fourteen your eyes are better than mine and it’s about time you began to earn your daily bread,” answered his father, ruffling his son’s hair affectionately.

After an hour’s work, Jacopo said he thought he was satisfied.

Alfonso set up the dies again and gave a blow with the hammer. After a good half hour spent turning and twisting the coin, observing it from all angles and in all lights, they concluded that they had done an excellent job.

Alfonso asked his son to bring him the good blanks, the special ones, those with his personal gold mixture and he began patiently and carefully to beat them with his mallet: after making eleven coins he stopped.

They were both very tense; Jacopo had almost reverently picked up each newly minted piece and wrapped it in a clean cloth. They placed the eleven coins in a row and repeated the ceremonial examination: they were perfect, beautiful. They wrapped them in a cloth and placed them in the coffer; then they left the little room, carefully closing the door.

The door was clad with brick on the outside and once it was closed, anyone standing before it would see only a smooth wall.

A few days later, Captain Ardiles arrived to commission more silver coins from Prince Ferrero: and with the excuse of checking that the mint was in order, he asked Alfonso to give him the ten coins he had ordered.

Alfonso kept the eleventh coin for himself.

## *Liguria – 1636*

Captain Guillermo Ardiles had secretly placed the ten coins in the coffers of the governor of Milano, Don Diego Felipe de Guzman. The time had come to play the hand so meticulously prepared and, if all went as he had planned, it would raise him to the rank of baron.

At that time, the Duke Vittorio Emanuele of Savoy openly supported the French, also because his wife was *Madama Reale*, the regent, and the sister of King Louis XIII of France. Despite this the Savoy's ability to swiftly change their allegiances and punctually find themselves on the side of the winners was known to both the Spanish and the French and the future baron Guillermo de Ardiles y Bertrams intended to play his cards by taking advantage of this widespread belief.

As we said, the coins he had commissioned were not ordinary currency, they were intended as gifts to be exchanged at meetings between ambassadors.

From Milano he travelled in great pomp to Alessandria, escorted by a patrol of twenty faithful mounted dragoons and he continued to the Margravate of Finale, which was an enclave of the Dukedom of Milano within the Genovese Republic.

At Finale, he dismissed the dragoons, who no longer served his purpose and dressed in a manner as humble as he could bear. Then, after choosing as an escort a troop of minor soldiers of little military value, he set off towards Ventimiglia, remaining within the territory of the Genovese Republic.

When he neared the border, he deliberately took a route that would lead him across the frontier with the Principality of Monaco, so that he would necessarily meet the French troops at the border crossing. As soon as they appeared before his vacillating escort, he attacked, taking care to be captured... although without getting himself wounded.

The clash with the musketeers of King Louis XIII was swift and cruel and when Captain Ardiles had checked that he was the only survivor and without ammunition – in fact he had carefully thrown away his gunpowder – he feigned an attack with his sword.

This *noble* gesture was noticed by the captain of the musketeers Philippe de Salinelles who immediately ordered his men to cease firing and advanced alone, his sword in his hand, to offer his valorous adversary the possibility of an honourable surrender.

Our future baron accepted this proposal of surrender with the honour of war, saluted the enemy soldiers and ostentatiously replaced his sword in its scabbard.

Mounting his horse, he rode beside the French captain towards their camp.

In the meantime, the musketeers had found the little chest that Captain Ardiles had pretended to hide and carried it to their commander, Captain Philippe de Salinelles.

It was at this point that our hero, having received authorisation from the Governor Don Felipe de Guzman declared himself to be Baron de Ardiles y Bertrams and claimed all the honours and respect that his birth guaranteed.

“Sir,” answered the captain of the musketeers, “I am honoured to have you, even against your will, as my guest and I assure you that you shall come to no harm. I will escort you personally to Aix en Provence, where I will deliver you into the custody of one of your peers.”

“I thank you, captain,” answered the baron, “and I would like to have the objects that I lost during the clash restored to me.”

“If my lord agrees,” concluded the captain, “I will leave this decision to the authorities once we arrive in Aix.”

Our Captain Ardiles nodded, indicating that he accepted reluctantly, but in fact, he could not have hoped for more.

In effect, they never arrived in Aix en Provence, except for a brief transit, because a messenger sent there to herald the arrival of the Spanish prisoner returned with the order to continue to Lyon and on arriving there, to go immediately to the archbishop’s palace.

*Aix en Provence – 1636*

The news brought from Aix en Provence of the capture of a noble Spaniard had not attracted particular attention, except for that of the Dominican monk Lucien de Ploermel who, being an inquisitor, was curious by 'vocation' and wanted to take a look at the little chest with the ten coins.

Father Lucien had, by chance, accompanied the archbishop's secretary on a visit to the intendant at the *généralité* of Provence and was there when the messenger arrived with the news and the coffer. He was not a venal person and he was not interested in the coins' considerable material value but, as an inquisitor, he had developed a sort of sixth sense for anomalies in human behaviour, in their clothing, or the things they carried with them.

This coffer and the coins in it seemed strange and he wanted to observe the contents more closely.

"Hah! I knew it," grunted the monk after a good fifteen minutes spent examining the coins. The archbishop's secretary, who in the meantime had begun an interesting conversation with the intendant regarding the hindquarters of one of the maids, started in surprise.

"What is it Father Lucien?" asked the secretary.

"There was something that escaped me and now I have found it."

Then he turned to the intendant.

"*Monsieur*, could I ask whether you have a magnifying glass?"

The intendant called for his assistant, the Controller of Finances, who in addition to collecting taxes was also responsible for identifying counterfeit coins.

Shortly, they were all leaning over the intendant's table examining those ten objects with the magnifying glass.

"My lords, can you see those miniscule signs on the collar and the crest?" asked Father Lucien.

"But where?" chorused the others.

Father Lucien looked around, then he took a twig from the bundle in the huge fireplace, he broke it into pieces until he had a piece the size of a needle and with the help of the magnifying glass, he placed the tip against one of the details.

“There, my lord, look here!”

“That is amazing, how did you manage to see it with the naked eye?” And above all, what is it?” asked the intendant.

“These are alchemic symbols. It is very strange that they should be found on a coin. And what is even more strange... is that they are on a coin of this value and... significance.”

The persons in the group looked at each other blankly, without speaking. Then the archbishop’s secretary said, “It is true, these are not coins to be used at the market. Do you think they contain some sort of message?” he asked the intendant.

“Personally, I do not know,” said the intendant. “I feel it would be opportune to speak immediately to the archbishop so that His Eminence can decide what to do.” He turned to the archbishop’s secretary, “...perhaps you could suggest to His Eminence that the Cardinal of Lyon should also be informed.”

### *Lyon - 1636*

The archbishop of Lyon was Cardinal Alphonse-Louis du Plessis Duke of Richelieu and he was the older brother of the much more famous and influential Armand Jean du Plessis, the famous prime minister of King Louis XIII, who was also a cardinal: Cardinal Richelieu.

That week the two brothers had met by chance in Lyon, so that when the secretary of the Archbishop of Aix brought the news to his colleague in Lyon, the Prime Minister also immediately came to hear of it.

Now, the two brothers were conversing in the archbishop’s private study and examining the coins that had been brought to them and set on a large table beside the window.

“It is a trap, a trick, but I don’t understand who is to be harmed,” said the more famous of the two brothers. “Alphonse, I need your fraternal help. Have the Spaniard brought here: I will interrogate him, pretending to be your secretary.”

The archbishop glanced sideways and nodded with a smile, “So, my dear brother, for once I will have the pleasure of giving you orders.”

The following day the so-called Baron Ardiles, with an escort of six mounted musketeers entered the gateway to the palace of the Archbishop of Lyon. The musketeers led him up a staircase and along the corridors until they arrived at a door closed and guarded by soldiers with helmets and armour.

One of the soldiers knocked and a young priest, his hands folded in his sleeves, greeted Captain Ardiles in fluent Spanish and said that the secretary to the Archbishop was waiting for him.

They entered a room that was modest in size and furnishings. There was a door that, as he found later, communicated with the archbishop’s study.

The Cardinal, in the garb of a secretary was standing beside the desk and greeted him with chilly grace.

“*Monsieur le baron,*” began the ‘secretary’, “you will forgive me if I do not speak your language as well as my assistant. Moreover, you will understand that your presence here is, to say the least, incongruous. It will perhaps surprise you that it is the archbishopric and not the King who will deal with you, but... you see, at times curious coincidences occur.”

“In fact, I was wondering,” said the captain, “why I was brought before the Curia and not the army.”

“In our kingdom, as you can imagine, the prime minister and closest councillor to His Majesty the King is one of God’s priests,” continued the ‘secretary’, while Captain Ardiles observed him, tempted to retort ‘Yes, certainly, I know that your cardinal believes in God,’ but he held his tongue.

“The news of your, let us say ‘encroachment’ was brought to our attention because the coins you carry with you show anomalies.”

“Anomalies?” asked Captain Ardiles.

“Yes, anomalies. They are coins of great value and I do not think you were about to use them for your personal expenses. What is more, and this is very strange, they bear alchemic symbols!”



“Alchemic?” asked the Captain, “Excuse me, but what do you mean by al-chemic?”

“Alchemic, that has to do with alchemy!” said the ‘secretary’ calmly.

Captain Ardiles tried, he did not know how he managed it, to pale and widening his eyes, he crossed himself three times, stuttering, “Is it a question of witchcraft?”

“In some ways, it could be, that depends on you,” said the ‘secretary’ in a conciliating but increasingly treacherous tone.

“On me? But, but, but... what do I have to do with it?” asked Captain Ardiles paling even more.

“Perhaps you are not involved, but it certainly not the duty of the archbishop to ascertain this. It is the inquisition that deals with these matters and their methods, you who come from the kingdom of Spain should know it well, are very convincing.”

“What do you mean? Is that a threat, perhaps? Do not forget that you are speaking to a Spanish nobleman!” the self-proclaimed baron almost shouted.

“Calm yourself baron, do not forget that you are a guest, ours and notwithstanding, a guest of the Holy Roman Church whose mission is to pardon and redeem. I may agree with you regarding your blamelessness and the fact that you ignored the presence and the meaning of those symbols.”

“Now, that is reasonable,” agreed the captain.

“However...” said the ‘secretary’.

“However...?”

“However, if you were to help us understand the provenance of these coins, the archbishop might be sympathetic to your cause and find a solution. You know that the brother of His Eminence...”

“The brother of His Eminence...?” asked Captain Ardiles raising his eyebrows.

“The brother of His Eminence, our beloved Archbishop Alphonse-Louis du Plessis, of whom I am the humble secretary, is the Cardinal Armand Jean du Plessis: Cardinal Richelieu.”

Captain Ardiles managed to assume such an utterly distressed attitude that even the inflexible ‘secretary’ was almost sorry for him.

“What... what can I do?” implored the captain, “to convince His Eminence of my innocence?”

“I think that the truth will be sufficient,” repeated the ‘secretary’.

“The truth?”

“Yes, just that. Come now, tell me why you were carrying those coins and you will see that we find a solution,” said the cardinal impatiently. He was beginning to find his disguise as a secretary rather trying.

“It is embarrassing... my honour... if it were known...,” whimpered the captain artfully.

“Come, come, simply imagine that you are in the confessional. Everything will remain under the seal of confession...,”

Captain Ardiles pulled himself together, adopted a proud stance and began to tell his tale.

“I was travelling with a detachment of my mounted dragoons towards Cremona, where I had camped, to meet my peer in the Margrave of Finale, our enclave within the Genovese Republic. The territories we crossed have indeterminate borders, but anyway, I was sure that we were still in the territory of the Dukedom of Milano. It was there that we saw in the distance a patrol of ambiguous appearance that did not return our greetings; rather they tried to hide in the woods. We followed them and we scattered them. They left on the ground many of their men and a wooden box: a coffer. I opened it and I found the coins.”

The cardinal-secretary was observing him with a perplexed and interrogative expression.

“That is the truth! And... and it is difficult for me to continue, because... because it is not particularly honourable!”

“Continue,” ordered the cardinal.

“In Finale I met with Baron Felipe de Figueras, an old friend, and asked him what I should do with those coins. He told me that they were ‘illicit’ and that if I

took them to Milano I would have to answer a thousand questions: better to be rid of them. I asked him if there was a way that was not merely throwing that cornucopia into the sea and whether he knew of someone trustworthy who would buy them. He answered that it was too risky there in Finale or anywhere in the Genovese Republic. He suggested that I go to the Principality of Monaco and that there, perhaps, I would find a buyer. I pointed out that to reach Monaco I would have to travel through enemy country, and he showed me a route to get there without meeting any dangers,” the captain paused for a minute or more.

“Well?” asked the so-called secretary, increasingly impatiently.

“Well... well, I took the wrong road and I encountered your patrol. What a humiliation!”

“Because you were smuggling coins?”

“Of course not!” replied the captain proudly. “Because I got lost! What will become of my honour as a soldier?”

They both fell silent then the cardinal, without shedding his disguise as the archbishop’s secretary, made Captain Ardiles a proposal.

“These coins would bring you little fortune... particularly if you were to find yourself in one of the palace dungeons.”

“But... how dare you...”

“Quiet, quiet, of course we dare! However, we can offer you an alternative: with the help of the Archbishop of Milano, we will propose to Governor of Milano an exchange – yourself for our valorous soldier, Baron di Plessis who, like yourself, and to his displeasure, is an involuntary and undesired guest at the castle of Milano. As a last gift, we will not mention to anyone that you were in possession of these coins.”

They both fell silent, from the half-open window came the subdued noise of daily life in the courtyard of the archbishop’s palace.

“Well? Have you decided?” asked the ‘secretary’, “I must refer your answer to His Eminence.”

The captain stood up, he struck a very aloof attitude and in a firm, proud voice,

said, "I accept."

### *Vercelli – September 1637*

The previous year, in 1636, a battle had taken place at Tornavento, a place near Novara on the banks of the River Ticino: a bloody battle between the Spanish army and the French, who were allied with the Dukedom of Savoy. The battle was significant for the war between the two countries, which had been dragging on for years and which became known as the 'Thirty Years' War'.

Commanding the allied troops were the Duke Charles III de Blanchefort-Créqui and the duke Vittorio Amedeo I of Savoy.

This alliance, which was also founded on their friendship, was successful when on September 8<sup>th</sup> 1637 the allied French and Savoy armies again defeated the Spanish army at Mombaldone, on the borders with the Genovese Republic.

To celebrate this new victory, on the evening of September 25<sup>th</sup> the duke Charles de Créqui organised a dinner in honour of his friend and companion in victory Vittorio Amedeo. The dinner was held in Vercelli and the luxury and pomp were fitting for the reputation of the duke of Créqui.

He was not the sort to pretend modesty: many still recalled with amazement the magnificence and the ostentatiousness with which the duke had arrived in Rome in 1633, on the occasion of an extraordinary ambassadorship to the Pope.

However, something or someone played a nasty trick on the Duke of Crequi's reputation and an even worse trick on his guest's health.

Without going into unpleasant detail, the ceremonial dinner ended in a deluge of cramps in the stomach and the intestine that sent most of the guests rushing for their rooms.

One in particular, Duke Vittorio Amedeo I, was particularly affected and he died a few days later, in the night between the sixth and the seventh of October.

The Cardinal Armand du Plessis Duke of Richelieu certainly did not weep for that death, which freed him of a person who was a nuisance to him and who was

becoming too popular both in Savoy and in France. In fact, Vittorio Amedeo had married Christine Marie of France, the sister of King Louis XIII and he was a determined and resolute man: who knows what Christine Marie, who became the regent of the Duchy on his death could have demanded if King Louis XIII, who had little taste for feminine lovers, were to die without leaving an heir?

He was annoyed that he had been forced to poison, even if only mildly, so many people. It had been necessary to cause a general commotion in order to distract attention, because a specific campaign against the duke would have been tantamount to declaring “Yes! It was I!”

The only thing that continued to disturb his intelligent mind was that strange set of coins found in the possession of that curious baron.

“De Arviles? Ardiles? Oh, what the devil was his name? And who knew if that was his real name?” he thought as he examined them.

Those coins continued to represent a puzzle for the cardinal who was convinced that the baron was not the booby he tried to seem, but rather that he was trying, commissioned by Vittorio Amedeo, to take those coins to someone. But to whom? To the Spanish court? Perhaps. After all, Vittorio Amedeo grew up in Madrid and Richelieu was convinced that his heart had always remained in Spain.

Or perhaps to Gaston, Duke of Orléans? The brother of King Louis XIII who, inspired by his mother Marie de’ Medici, had always been the cardinal’s open enemy, even ordering a plot against him.

In any case, he had solved the problem. But what if he had been tricked? What if the Duke of Savoy really had nothing to do with the affair? Never mind. The crown of France left no room for doubts, better a dead friend than a live enemy.

Nonetheless, those strange signs must contain a message, some sort of cypher; they were certainly not mere alchemic fantasies. Armand du Plessis did not believe in alchemy, he did not believe in anything, particularly not in God: why should he, Cardinal Richelieu, believe that there was a being superior to himself? Did they think him that naïve?

He took the nine remaining coins; he had destroyed the tenth by trying to melt it down and replaced them in the coffer. He had discovered that they were not made from pure gold; instead, they contained a fair amount of a powder that did not melt in the flame but remained inert. Another enigma that challenged his intelligence.

He never did solve the puzzle, not because he forgot about it, merely because he was distracted by more important concerns.

### *Masserano – October 1637*

The man was creeping along the walls of the houses to avoid being seen. It was late at night and he absolutely must not be discovered, that was why he was dressed as a hired ruffian to complete his task and finally attain the title of baron: Captain Baron Ardiles!

The trick with the *scudo* coins had gone much better than he and the governor Don Diego Felipe de Guzman could have hoped: by now, no one in Milano doubted that the mysterious death of the Duke of Savoy was the work of Richelieu.

In particular, for the captain, the doubt had become a certainty once he had seen a portrait of the cardinal: it was that damned ‘secretary’!

It annoyed him, and not little, to have to conclude a task conducted so brilliantly and efficiently in such a dishonourable manner. However, he was a soldier and a good soldier did not discuss the orders he had received: wipe out all traces.

He found Benassi’s house and waved over the two thugs he had hired. The house was set slightly apart from its neighbours and this allowed them to operate with greater ease.

The pair entered while the captain remained outside in the shadows to check that no one went past or could see them and give the alarm.

A little later, they came out and hid nearby in a cranny they had found the day before, to make sure that their work went well.

“Were they all there?” asked the captain.

The two thugs nodded. Then a thin plume of smoke filtered from under the roof and with a sudden rush fire lit up the entire ground floor, spreading immediately to the rest of the building.

The little group watched the wood burn, helped by the saltpetre they had scattered liberally on the floors: they did not realise that eyes damp with tears of rage were watching them and the terrible scene from behind a nearby hedge.

In the meantime, the neighbours began to arrive with buckets of water to try to put out the fire. When there was a sufficient crowd, the trio decided to leave their hiding place, mingle with the mob and then disappear.

The boy who had been watching the group immediately recognised Captain Ardiles, despite his disguise: he had seen him when he came to his father Alfonso to collect the coins.

That night, young Jacopo Benassi had visited the privy at the back of the house just a few moments before the two ruffians entered. Now, despite his fourteen years of age and the glare of the fire still burning in his eyes, he had taken a ruthless decision that would change his future life: to revenge the deaths of his father and his mother. Not at that precise moment, he would not be able to do it, he would carry out his task in the future, with the calm and patience that his father had taught him to show when he was learning to work with the burin.

The trio left the town and marched in the pitch dark for at least one mile. For the last ten minutes the two thugs had been demanding their reward and wanted to leave, but the captain insisted that he still needed their assistance.

When they drew close to an abandoned gravel pit, they did not even have time to see the two pistols that the captain had drawn: two shots were sufficient. He dragged the lifeless bodies for a few metres to the bottom of a pile of gravel. Climbing back to the top of the pit, he took a large fallen branch and used it to sweep the ground until the gravel began to slide downwards covering all traces of his deed.

### *Paris – October 1642*

The past year had been particularly difficult for Cardinal Richelieu against whom there were frequent plots designed to free France of his weighty presence. The last of these plots, thought up by Gaston d'Orléans, the king's brother, had involved Henri Coiffier de Ruzé, Marquis de Cinq-Mars, who according to gossip was the lover of King Louis XIII. As a result of the plot, the marquis lost his head (literally) and many other people lost their place at court. The cardinal then insisted that the king should get rid of the captain of the musketeers, but the king was reluctant to do so and promised the captain that sooner or later he would be restored to his rank. Towards the end of November, when the cardinal, whose health was now compromised, heard this news, he had a sort of collapse.

On the third of December, the cardinal seemed to rally, but even though he felt stronger, he still had the impression that death was near, very near. At that time, he recalled by chance the strange gold coins carried by the Spanish baron. He called over his niece, the Duchesse d'Aiguillon, who had never left his bedside. She came closer and listened to the words her uncle whispered into her ear. Then he gave her the key he kept round his neck and asked her to open the coffer and bring him that curious treasure of which no one had ever heard.

He told his niece the story of how the coins had come into his possession and entrusted them to her, leaving her the task of discovering what secret lay behind those mysterious symbols.

The Cardinal worsened during the night and died around noon the following day, on December 4<sup>th</sup> 1642.

### *Masserano – October 1647*

Ten years had now passed since the last time Baron Guillermo de Ardiles had visited Masserano and he did not have good memories of the place. Not that he was ashamed, heck, he was a soldier of the King of Spain, but it had certainly not been an enterprise of which he would boast.



He had now returned, after many years, to have medallions made to commemorate his social position.

The mint of the principality had continued its activities despite the continual problems caused by its doubtful 'specialisation' and Baron de Ardiles had continued to use their services, without, as in the past, appearing personally.

The minter to the Ferrero princes for the last three years was Bernardo Garimondo from Torino, a hard-nosed chap who knew his trade and who had already argued with Prince Ferrero about his inveterate habit of taking more than his due of the precious metals used at the mint.

Amongst the various workers at the mint was a young man of about twenty, who appeared to have an inherent skill for drawing and engraving.

Garimondo, after discussing the project with Baron de Ardiles called the young man and ordered him to carry out the noble Spaniard's commission with particular care.

While the baron talked, the youth began to sketch his face on a piece of card. The baron watched the young man's hand moving swiftly over the paper but a thought troubled him.

"Your face is not new to me. Tell me young man, what is your name and where do you come from?"

The youth raised his gaze from the drawing and with a humble attitude he said, "My name is Jacopo and I come from Ca' d' Fantù, Monsieur le Baron."

"Cadfa...?" asked the baron.

Garimondo, who had overheard the conversation, intervened.

"I beg you to excuse him, milord. You must know that these villagers think that their home is the centre of the world. Cà d'Fantun, that is Casa Fantone, is a hamlet in a town nearby," and then, turning to the young man he said in dialect "*Jacù date 'n andit e finis an pres'a al travai par munsù 'l barun*" (Jacopo, hurry up and finish this work for his lordship).

The baron was leaving in the company of the minter but a doubt continued to nag at him and he turned to look at Jacopo once again.

“Are your parents still alive?” he asked.

Jacopo, humbly and reverently answered in a sad tone.

“I lost them both...”

The baron’s face hardened.

“...I lost them both some years ago to a terrible fever. God bless them.”

The baron relaxed and he said, “Do a good job, I pray you. I have seen that you have a skilled hand!”

“Thank you, sir, you are very kind,” answered the youth in a low voice.

The neighbours had assumed that Jacopo Benassi was burned alive with his parents in the fire at their house ten years earlier. However, after living in the woods for a month, he had turned up in the nearby village of Mortigliengo, where he was treated as a vagabond orphan. Shortly afterwards, the curate of the village, who had seen him to be willing and good-natured, had entrusted him to a childless couple who lived in the nearby hamlet called Fantone and they had welcomed him as their son. Thus, he became for everyone, Jacopo Fantone.

A week later Baron Ardiles returned to see and approve the design of the medallion he had ordered.

For seven days, Jacopo had worked with his burin and his chisel to make two dies, the two iron dies that would impress the metal disks, ten in gold and fifty in silver, as requested by the baron, with the definitive forms of the medallion.

The baron had asked, in order to give final approval of the work, for a test piece in pure gold, the others would be in a lower carat. Jacopo wanted to mint this medallion personally and after adjusting the tiniest defects and carefully polishing it, he rinsed it and dried it with a chamois cloth. Then he put on gloves of the finest cotton and held it out to the baron so that he could examine it.

The baron took the coin, turned it in his fingers and with a sly look stared at Jacopo, narrowing his eyes, then he asked,

“You are not, by chance, trying to cheat me once again and you have added something... like ten years ago?”

Jacopo did not answer; he simply gazed at him absently.

The baron put the medallion to his mouth and tested it by biting into it.

This was the moment that Jacopo had waited ten years for. The final polishing of the medallion had been carried out with a solution of arsenic and the chamois cloth was also soaked in the poison.

The baron felt a strange taste on his tongue. He placed the coin on the table and turned to Jacopo with a doleful smile.

“I must say that unlike ten years ago, this time the gold is pure. However, there is, as always, something strange and I think it is a matter of... arsenic, that is the substance you put in the water you used to rinse the medal before you handed it to me wearing gloves: what care!”

Jacopo glared at him, but he was worried about the baron’s reaction. Arsenic did not have either odour or taste, how had he realised? What would he do now? The poison would not take effect for hours: would he kill him with his sword? Would he be thrown into prison and tortured?

The baron stared at him challengingly and asked,

“Do you know who Mithridates was?”

“No... I don’t know.”

“I thought not. Well, he was a king who lived many centuries ago. He was an enemy of the Romans.”

“Of the Pope...?”

“No! No! He lived a very long time before Our Lord was born. He was a courageous king who fought against Rome and had many enemies who wanted to kill him both by the sword and by poison. He was not afraid of the sword because he was valorous and could defend himself. However, he was afraid of poison and so he began taking small quantities of arsenic, quantities that increased until he became immune.”

Jacopo stared at him and his mouth fell open, but he could not say a word, while the baron continued.

“Like many soldiers, I am also very good with my sword and so anyone who did not dare to attack me with a sword has often tried to kill me using poison. I have

been forced to take my precautions, like the ancient king: arsenic makes me ill, very ill, but it does not kill me. I am sorry to tell you.”

Jacopo was truly afraid and expecting the baron to attack him, he had grabbed the mallet he used to mint the coins.

“Put it down,” ordered the baron calmly, “it would do you no good: you would not even have the time to lift it.”

He walked towards the young man and said,

“I am not angry, you tried to do what you could to revenge your honour and I cannot blame you: I would have done the same.”

Jacopo had put down the mallet and now he flopped to the floor with his head lowered, staring at the ground.

The baron stood before him, he took a huge pistol from his belt and used the muzzle to lift the lad’s chin, saying,

“You are much more use to me alive than dead. Finish the job that Garimondo gave you and do it well: because they are my medallions! Remember that we are now equal.”

He returned his pistol to his belt and turned to leave the room.

On the threshold, he stopped, turned and said, “In a month’s time I will return to collect the medallions... and you.”

“M... me?” stuttered Jacopo.

“Yes! You will be my personal minter: you’ll see, you’ll be content.”

### *Sabbioneta – 1693*

Jacopo had arrived in Sabbioneta almost fifty years ago with Baron Ardiles, who had had moved there from Milano when the king of Spain granted the house of Guzmàn, of which the baron was a vassal, the governance of the city.

There had been a mint at Sabbioneta for more than a hundred years and the baron settled Jacopo there in the position of official engraver, but also and above all, in the less well-known function of counterfeiter serving His Royal Highness

and personal maker of medallions for the baron.

Jacopo's skill had increased over the years, not only in the art of engraving, but also in the field of alchemy, a world of light and shadows, where his father Alfonso had spent much of his time.

He still jealously guarded the first coin he had struck, having recovered it from its hiding place before he left Masserano. That eleventh coin, in what was to be a series of ten, which the baron had commissioned from his father almost sixty years earlier.

He knew the secret of that coin, the fact that it contained a heavy powder rather than gold, but he had never used this artifice: he wanted it to remain his father's masterpiece.

In the year 1689 the Duke Nicola Maria de Guzmàn Carafa, the last descendent of the house of Gonzaga, died without heirs and thus the city passed under the direct control of the Spanish crown, which in effect made it part of the dukedom of Milano.

Jacopo was now seventy years old, he had three children and five grandchildren and he lived a tranquil life. Only one of his sons, Secondino, had inherited his father's talent, but when the mint of Sabbioneta closed down, he was unable to find work and accepted a post at a smaller mint in a town on the Lake Maggiore, Maccagno. Secondino moved there with his family and never returned to Sabbioneta.

Before he left, his father Jacopo gave Secondino the famous coin. He had told his son the story a thousand times, insisting that he should leave it to his son, who would in turn leave it to his and so on forever.

Secondino settled in Angera, where he worked for the Marquis Carlo Borromeo, merely a namesake for the more famous Saint Carlo, who had recently purchased the fiefdom with the intention of reviving the neglected imperial concession to mint coins.

Secondino's story was much less adventurous than that of his father and his grandfather, also because the figure of the counterfeiters disappeared since the

new states that were establishing themselves in northern Italy were much more attentive and rigorous in defending the good name of their currencies.

Secondino continued the tradition begun by his grandfather Alfonso, keeping a log of their activities. In addition to this diary, he wrote an account of his family based on the stories that he had heard as a child and which his father had repeated constantly. Now that he had left Sabbioneta, on hearing the news of his father's death, he missed him and felt a burning homesickness.

## PART TWO

### *Locarno – early April 1929*

Carlo Fantone had risen early that morning, at least, early with respect to his usual habits. After shaving and after checking meticulously that his moustaches were of the same length – two fine, squared black moustaches – he swiftly left the house, without even preparing his usual coffee or saying goodbye to his father Siro, who in any case was still sleeping, then he almost ran down the staircase of his house in Piazza San Francesco.

Carlo was tall, slim, with dark chestnut hair threatened by encroaching baldness at the temples and wide dark eyes, inherited from his mother.

He strode towards Piazza Grande, crossing it without stopping, but not without nodding at his friend Eugenio, who was standing at the door of his shop. He turned his steps towards the post office, which faced onto the square, hoping to be able to finally collect the parcel he had been awaiting impatiently for days: the latest edition of the *Gazette de L'hôtel Drouot*. This was the newspaper, or rather the newsletter, printed in Paris and considered of vital importance for any antiquarian worthy of that name, since three times a week it reported the dates of the *objets d'art* and collector's items to be held in France, and the results of the past auctions.

He went to the “parcels” counter and collected an envelope that he tore open without even sitting down. He put on his spectacles and began excitedly turning the pages until he found the news and the date he had been awaiting for some time: ‘Paris, 13<sup>th</sup> April, 15:00 hours, Hôtel Drouot, Hall 12!’

He sighed with satisfaction, replaced his spectacles in the pocket of his jacket, left the post office and with a sprightly step approached the glassware shop of his friend Eugenio Fantone with whom he shared a surname, but no kinship.

Carlo, thirty years old, like his friend Eugenio, came from a family that had settled in Angera, a small town on the southern Lombardy bank of Lake Maggiore, in the sixteen hundreds. His ancestors had worked for centuries as engravers of medallions and coins, but this ancient and noble tradition was now lost and Carlo, like his father before him, had become a respected antiques dealer.

His father Siro, who had moved to Switzerland in the mid-nineteenth century, thanks to his work and the contacts he had made, had gained Swiss citizenship but for the Ticinese of good and ancient families, those who pompously called themselves the patricians, Siro obviously remained an *italianasc*. He certainly did not care about this snobbery, and had even taken pleasure when these self-nominated patricians came into his shop, with their noses in the air, to ask the price of items that they could often not afford to buy.

Apart from the shared surname, which was the reason they first met, Carlo and Eugenio came from the same village in Piemonte, between Biella and Novara: Masserano.

Stefano Fantone, Eugenio's father, had left the town where he was born around the second half of the nineteenth century, just before his twentieth birthday, carrying a basket of pottery on his back and he had stopped in Locarno determined to make his fortune.

Just before an illness took him, he proudly told the story of how he placed his basket on a stone standing to one side of Piazza Grande like a stool and decided that sooner or later he would open a shop in that very square.

He began as a travelling salesman and after only ten years, he married and Eugenio and other children were born. He rented a shop in Piazza Grande, then he bought it, then he bought the entire building and finally, he asked the Locarno town council for permission to move the famous stone, the one from which his story was born, to a position beside the door to his shop.

Eugenio, whose father had sent him to study at the lyceum in the German canton, spoke three languages fluently and successfully, managed the business



he had inherited; in fact, he had also opened a second shop in Bellinzona.

Eugenio was waiting for his friend on the threshold of the shop.

“This is it, this is it... mid-month in Paris!” said Carlo, his big dark eyes wide with excitement while he held the open newsletter in his left hand and tapped the item with the fox head on his walking stick.

Eugenio looked at the advertisement. He was shorter and stouter than his companion and he was not given to excitement, but he could understand his friend’s agitation.

Years ago Carlo had told him of a very rare coin that his father had told him to seek because he thought that it had been made by one of their ancestors in the now-distant 1630 and it was precisely this story that had given rise to their acquaintance: it seemed that the coin had been produced in Masserano, and Eugenio’s father was born nearby.

“So, will you come with me to Paris? We’ll have fun.”

“I wish I could, you know that my wife, Chiara, hasn’t been well lately and as for going alone... well, you know how jealous she is!”

“I know, but we can say that we are not going alone, my father will be with us.”

“You are right, my dear friend, however, for the sake of a peaceful life, believe me, it is better that way.”

Eugenio turned and nodded to someone inside the shop, then he turned back to Carlo and said, “Let’s go and have a coffee, then you can tell me the whole story.”

*Paris – 11<sup>th</sup> April 1929*

The Hôtel Millennium was close to the Opéra, a very convenient location for visiting the city, but above all for reaching Hôtel Drouot, which was the reason for his trip. Carlo had arrived the previous evening on the express train from Geneva, then he had taken a taxi to the hotel recommended by Eugenio; an excellent hotel, it had opened one year ago and was decidedly luxurious with all

the most recent comforts that technology could offer. It was also frequented by artists like Jean Cocteau and celebrities like Lindbergh, who lived there after his famous transatlantic flight.

He dressed almost as if he were attending a ceremony and set off on foot; after all, it was only a short walk, along the Boulevard Haussmann, turning right into rue Drouot.

He sniffed appreciatively at the spring air of Paris, feeling in a good mood; as an antiques dealer, he came to the city quite often.

The Hôtel Drouot had for many years been a source of business for Carlo, he was known personally at the auction house and had worked with a number of its experts. However, he had rarely dealt in coins and for this reason the person he was to meet was a new acquaintance and Carlo was very curious.

Carlo asked the *conciierge* for monsieur Jakub Janowski, imagining him to be a Polish aristocrat who had fled to Paris during the war.

A messenger led him to the door of an office, where he knocked and announced to Janowski the presence of a visitor.

After the greetings and the polite exchange of comments on the Parisian weather, they got down to business: the registration for the auction and the examination of the coin.

It was an important numismatic auction and the coins for sale were, almost all, visible in four large display cabinets standing in the centre of the room. Two armed guards stood at the door.

As we said, *almost all* were visible, because some, actually half a dozen, could only be seen by appointment and in a private, well-protected room.

So, they approached a very stout door, defended by a guard with a rifle. Mr Janowski took out a bunch of keys and opened three locks, then he ushered Carlo into a lobby, followed him and locked the door behind them. Then he tapped a signal on the inner door, a peephole opened and finally the door was opened from inside by another armed guard.

The gold coin, ten *scudi* dated 1632 with a portrait of the Duke Vittorio Amedeo

of Savoy, was not merely rare, it was one of only five known pieces. One belonged to the Tsar Nikolai II and was kept at the Hermitage in Leningrad. The second was in Rome, in the collection of Vittorio Emanuele III, the third in the Numismatic Cabinet of the Vatican and the fourth piece was held at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon.

What made these coins particularly rare and sought after by collectors was not only their intrinsic beauty, but also the fact that they were all counterfeits, of excellent quality, but still counterfeit.

Given their counterfeit nature, it was not known why they were produced, since they could not be spent: they were coins of the kind commonly called *monete d'ostentazione*, literally ostentation coins, since they were used exclusively by the powerful to show their status and not for commercial exchanges.

The mystery of their nature and certain curious events had given the coins a dark and evil reputation, or at least this was what the superstitious believed.

The fact was that they were certainly the reason for the death of the Duke Vittorio Amedeo I of Savoy. In fact, it was said that Cardinal Richelieu, who had by chance come to own them, had used them to disgrace the duke in the eyes of the king, Louis XIII. The duke had died shortly afterwards, certainly not by chance, poisoned during a banquet served in his honour.

By a curious coincidence, the coins also brought little good fortune to cardinal, who had kept them for his private collection, because he died suddenly just a few years later.

It was as if a strange and evil fate awaited the owners of these coins: almost all of those who inherited them had little luck and many were overwhelmed by circumstances and not only during the revolution of 1789.

Another striking case, at least amongst the numismatists, concerned Marie Duplessis, the famous 'lady of the camellias'. A mocking similarity in their names, certainly not kinship, casually linked Marie to the dynasty, *du Plessis*, of Cardinal Richelieu. At the start of 1847, Marie received the gift of a gold coin from one of her admirers, the coin that Carlo Fantone was now admiring, and a

few months later she died of tuberculosis, young and regretted by the whole of Paris.

“*É veramente stupenda!*” exclaimed Carlo in Italian.

“That is true Signor Fantone, but believe me *chella è na seccia, chella ammarca 'a peste.*” (In Neapolitan dialect ‘it is cursed and will bring bad luck).

Carlo slipped off his monocle and stared in amazement at the ‘Polish’ gentleman.

“But... Forgive me, I beg you, I thought that you were Swiss French, therefore I spoke to you in French. Which you speak very well.”

“Signor Fantone, you are very kind, but that is one of my two mother tongues: the second is Neapolitan.”

“That is curious, since your name is somewhat... exotic.”

The ‘Polish-Neapolitan’ leaned back in his armchair and laughed delightedly at the remark.

“My great-grandfather Jakub Janowski, whose name I have the honour to bear, was in fact from Poland, where the aristocratic families spoke French. My great-grandfather was an officer in Napoleon’s army when Poland became a French protectorate and in 1815, he found himself in Napoli, where he met my great-grandmother.

“Ahh... what a romantic story!” laughed Carlo, then he continued. “Excuse me Signor Janowski, but what did you say before? ‘*Chell’...?*”

“Ah! *Chella ammarca 'a peste?* It is a Neapolitan saying that means something brings bad luck: a hex, a jinx!” said Janowski, clasping the traditional horn of red coral that he wore on his watch chain.

“I would not want that coin even if it were a gift. It is an evil totem.”

“Oh come now, we both know that these are legends, rumours. You who have handled it every day for the last week are quite well!” retorted Carlo, amused and irritated at the same time.

“Certainly, but apart from certain precautions,” he indicated the coral amulet, “the coin is not mine. I am merely the temporary custodian.”

“Well, believe whatever you want. The coin will be auctioned the day after

tomorrow, right?” asked Carlo as he left.

“Certainly, Signor Fantone, it will be one of the last lots and it will be auctioned the day after tomorrow, Friday the thirteenth of April!”

Janowski shook Carlo’s hand, keeping his left hand behind his back in a vigorous and protective typically Neapolitan gesture.

*Paris – 12th April 1929*

*Signor Siro Fantone*

*Piazza Sant’Antonio*

*Locarno*

*Switzerland*

*Dear Father,*

*I have arrived in Paris and tomorrow I will be present at the auction of ‘our’ coin, which I hope we will be successful in buying.*

*Today I went to Drouot where I met a surprising character: our interlocutor Monsieur Janowski is not Polish, as we believed, or at least, only in part. He comes from a noble Neapolitan family; his great-grandfather came to Italy with Napoleon and settled in Napoli. Life is certainly full of surprises!*

*What I still cannot understand is how such a competent and respected person can be so superstitious: he was terrified by the coin, almost as if the stories about it were true. He is convinced, he told me so in a dialectal saying that I cannot recall, that the coin brings bad luck!*

*Yesterday, when I returned to meet our acquaintances at Drouot, I asked their opinion of Signor Janowski and everyone, I mean every single person, praised and complimented his competence and his expertise!*

*Truly, I cannot understand how a person of his calibre can possibly believe in such superstitions.*

*Your son Carlo*

*Locarno – 13<sup>th</sup> April 1929*

*Monsieur Carlo Fantone*

*Chez Hôtel Millennium*

*Boulevard Haussmann*

*Paris*

*My dear Carlo*

*The behaviour of our ‘Polish’ friend does not surprise me particularly, since you will forgive your old father for having so far hidden a curious and at the same time disquieting aspect of the coin that we are trying to purchase. When you return I will tell you the whole story and the origin, which will certainly surprise you, of this curious piece. For now, it is sufficient for you to know that there is some truth in the bad reputation that accompanies the coin but to be honest, I also hoped that with time and better education people would finally cease believing in this nonsense, I was wrong.*

*I wish you every success at today’s auction and look forward to hearing your news.*

*Your father.*

*Paris – 13<sup>th</sup> April 1929*

*Signor Siro Fantone*

*Piazza Sant’Antonio*

*Locarno*

*Switzerland*

*Dear Father,*

*You will know from the telegram that I sent a little earlier that we were not successful at the auction. I certainly did not expect to meet such determined opposition from our adversary, who I have learned is an American collector from the city of New York, whose main activity concerns dealing on the stock exchange.*

*He was not present in person, but was represented by a French lady, Thérèse Milaud, very elegant and attractive, to whom I later introduced myself, complimenting her on her success and leaving with her our address in case the buyer should change his mind and decide to sell the coin.*

*I return home empty-handed, I no longer even want to enjoy an evening in Paris.*

*We will speak soon,*

*Your son Carlo.*

*Locarno – 15<sup>th</sup> April 1929*

“Well Carlo, what has happened? What was this Thérèse Milaud like, she seems to have bewitched you to the point where you lost the auction... and your heart?”

Siro Fantone observed his son with a sly air from behind his golden spectacles, which made him look like the Conte di Cavour.

“What do you mean bewitched, Father? I wish she had given me the slightest sign or chance: nothing! She is truly a very beautiful woman.”

“That is precisely what I meant! You see I was not wrong.”

“Rubbish, it was not her charms that beat me, but the offer of two hundred thousand francs, I repeat, two... hundred... thousand! They may be French francs but, goodness, that is four thousand of our francs: you can buy more than ten kilos of pure gold for that! But where would we find a sum like that?”

Siro was sitting in a chair behind his desk. He stared at his son, drew heavily on his cigar and puffing out the smoke he nodded before speaking.

“It is really amazing how these Americans buy almost anything with a total disregard for the cost... he was American, am I right?”

“Yes, but of Dutch origin, his name is van Buren.”

“As I said, I am amazed by the way these Americans can spend absurd sums, I would not have spent more than twenty thousand francs, perhaps it is just because the coin has a reputation for being jinxed.”

“No, no, Janowski used another expression, most unusual.”

Siro got up; he took a volume from the bookcase behind him and began to turn the pages.

“Did he perhaps say... bring...”

“No, it started differently.”

“*Ammarca ‘a peste?’*”

“That’s it. But why are you so interested in that phrase?”

“Nothing in particular! It just helps me to understand people. Anyway, it is just a matter of rumours and the exaggerations of popular gullibility, but there are circumstances that I would call disquieting. Sit down, take a cigar and listen.”

Carlo settled comfortably in a chair and after pouring himself a glass of sherry, he lit a cigarette and began to listen to Siro’s story.

*Locarno – 15<sup>th</sup> April 1929*

“You know that our family has a rather... well, a rather curious history, I would say. Until the last century, our ancestors handed down a profession that had lasted at least from the mid-sixteenth century. It was never openly mentioned because it was an activity that carried many risks, not because it was illegal, but because the intention of those who commissioned our ancestor’s work were not always honest.

The coins and the medallions that my great-grandfather was still engraving and minting in 1798 at Maccagno for the Marquis Borromeo were authentic and of good quality, but in the past that was not always the case.

You know that I now ‘waste my time’ as you call it, searching the parish records and the aristocratic archives for traces that will allow me to reconstruct our origins. So far, I have arrived at Sabbioneta where the parish registers show that a man called Jacopo Fantone had come to live in the village: where he came from and why he arrived there, I did not know.

Last month, while I was reading for the umpteenth time the register of the jobs



that Jacopo's son began to keep when he arrived in Angera at the start of seventeen hundred, the volume fell from my grasp and the cover came away. I took it immediately to Meralli, you know the bookbinder who has a workshop in via delle Monache, and the following day he called me to say that he had found something.

There were some pages with writing on them that had been glued to the cover and Meralli, who is very deft, had been able to separate them.”

Siro had stopped for a moment, both to create a little suspense and to catch his breath. Carlo, impatient, encouraged him to continue and asked rather irritably, why he was only mentioning this discovery now.

“It is all written in those few pages which it was not easy to decipher, because the ink is old and the handwriting is difficult to interpret. The person who is writing is Jacopo; I think he did so at the end of 1600, when he was settled in Sabbioneta. He also worked at the mint and he had learned his trade from his father... but he had a different surname. Jacopo's mother and father were killed in an arson attack from which the boy escaped quite by chance. Taken for dead he fled and was later adopted by a childless couple from whom he took his surname: Fantone.

The fire occurred in Masserano and, as Jacopo discovered much later, had been deliberately set because of a coin, or rather, because of a dozen coins. One of them is the one the coin that we did not manage to buy.”

Carlo did not move, he stared at his father, while his cigarette slowly burnt down between his fingers, dropping ash onto the carpet. He shook himself and asked, “A dozen coins? I thought they had minted lots of them and that they had been lost. Exactly how many were there?”

“There were eleven, yes, precisely eleven. Now listen. I am certain that Jacopo was the great-great grandfather of my great-great grandfather! While for you he would be... well it gets a bit complicated!

He was certainly talented, he was only a boy and yet he not only survived, he also continued his father's trade. His father had, on behalf of a very important

personage whose name Jacopo does not give, secretly made eleven counterfeit coins with the effigy of the Duke Vittorio Amedeo of Savoy. These coins were not only adroit fakes designed to discredit the duke, they also included, and this was a secret known only to Jacopo and his father, a reduced quantity of gold. The rest was a material that at the time had almost no value, because no one knew how to work it, since it had a very high melting point. Jacopo's father used it in powder as ballast, instead of the gold he was given, which had almost the same density.

The Spaniards, who had discovered it in America, first thought that it was silver, then since they could not use it in any way, they treated it as waste material and often just threw it away. Imagine! Imagine that they despised it so much they called it *platina* that is 'little silver'.

It was platinum. Pla-ti-num!"

"But how is it that these coins have earned such a notorious reputation and where are all the others?"

"We don't know how, Jacopo does not tell us, but all the other coins ended up in France, less one, which I will tell you about in a minute. What is more, they all finished in the hands of Cardinal Richelieu! The cardinal, who did not admire the Duke of Savoy, thought that he had an opportunity to get rid of him by making him look like a traitor in the eyes of King Louis XIII. I say this, because the duke represented on the coins died of poisoning shortly afterwards, perhaps it was merely a coincidence, however..."

The cardinal wanted to keep the coins for himself and perhaps it is just a coincidence also in this case, but from that moment on his health began to fail him. Five years later, he was still relatively young, not yet sixty years old, he died of tuberculosis, which the doctors had mistaken for an ulcer.

His niece, the duchess of ... ermm, well it's on the tip of my tongue... inherited part of his wealth but she gave almost everything, including these coins, to charity.

Now you know that, in addition to the one that has now left for the United

States, only four of the original eleven coins remain, we know nothing of the fate of the others. They were probably melted down.

Through the history of the four survivors I have managed to track down their previous owners and you, who are a sceptic and do not believe in these things, can call it a coincidence but I tell you that there is something very... odd, perhaps our Polish-Neapolitan friend is right: they bring bad luck to anyone who owns them!”

Siro got up from his armchair, served himself some more sherry, relit his cigar and, checking that Carlo had not fallen asleep, continued with his story. Carlo on the contrary seemed to have returned to childhood, when his father, in the evening before he went to bed, told him fantastic stories. He glanced at him with a complicit smile and said,

“Come on Father, you are teasing me, aren’t you?”

“Me? Teasing you? Listen to this, we will begin with the coin that is held in St. Petersburg in Russia, or if you prefer in Leningrad as those damned Bolsheviks now call it. It was taken to the Tsar Nikolai II by an official who had found it on the corpse of Rasputin. It certainly did not bring Rasputin any good, but neither did it benefit the Tsar.

After he was captured, everything that had belonged to the Tsar became the property of the Russian people: although it seems that the coins only harm people and not the institutions, not even the Russians can say that they were particularly lucky.

The second coin, the one in the Vatican, belonged to Napoleon Bonaparte to whom it was apparently donated by an officer who had ‘liberated it’, a court nowadays would say he had stolen it, from the Kremlin during the Russian campaign.

Napoleon kept it as a lucky charm since after the siege of the Kremlin he was convinced that he had conquered Russia. From that moment onwards, however, there followed the retreat, the defeat at the Battle of Leipzig, exile on Elba, Waterloo and later St. Helena.

Before leaving for exile, he asked a diplomat to take a gift to Pope Pius VII, who he had greatly angered. I do not know if he thought that it could bring him ill luck, but when the Pope received the coin he did not want to keep it and it was sent to the Numismatic Cabinet, where it is still kept, at the Holy See without having caused any more harm.

There is a coin, the third, which is now held at the Numismatic Cabinet in Brera, in Milano. You know that the king, apart from being a formidable expert in numismatics is also a keen collector. He purchased it, although we do not know who the previous owner was, when he was still Prince Vittorio Emanuele, as a gift for his father Umberto I. It was the beginning of 1900 and a few months later the king was assassinated at Monza.

Vittorio Emanuele, perhaps to free himself of a bad memory, or of an object that brought bad luck, don't forget that he was born in Napoli, donated it to the Brera museum: a significant gesture, considering that the coin is lacking in his collection.

The last known coin belongs to the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon. No one knows precisely how it came to be there, but we do know who its last owner was: Louis XVI. That is right! Now tell me that you don't believe it!"

Carlo gave guffawed, sipped at his sherry and lit another cigarette, since the first had turned to ask, forgotten as he listened attentively to the story.

"I'm not having it, Father, if these coins really had such evil power we would have at least four ruined museums, without mentioning the coin that was sold last week!"

"Ha! Well done! I wanted to mention that. Do you remember that last year there was a bank robbery in Berlin? It was a massacre, do you remember? One of the men who died was a certain Wilhelm von Niemberg."

"Wilhelm von Niemberg? *That* Wilhelm von Niemberg?"

"Yes, precisely him, the last owner of the coin in Paris. Come, don't look so dejected, it's lunchtime, let's go and see if Peppino has brought something good. Yesterday he grilled some perch fillets that..."

*Locarno – 15<sup>th</sup> April 1929*

*“Mi spiace sciur Fantone ma el persich me l’han minga portà. Tii, però se ghe piass ghe fu sagià un quai coss che l’ha mai pruà in vita sua: incö m’han menà scià un lusc che... l’è un spetacul”*

*(I’m sorry Mr Fantone but they didn’t bring me any perch this morning. If you like, I’ll prepare something special: today they brought me a magnificent pike.)*

*“But, Luigi! A pike, with all those little bones?”*

*“Trust me, trust me, sciur Fantone, I prepared it *alla mantovana*. I will bring it to the table without a single bone. If you find one, even just one, your meal is on me. It is just warm with a sauce that... well, you will tell me.”*

*“All right then, we’ll have the pike and we’ll drink a bottle of that white wine you gave me yesterday with it.”*

*“Ah good! The Blanc de Glaciers! It comes from Vallese, you know? *Ti, l’è minga facil de truvàa*: (it’s not easy to find) above all a good vintage.”*

Carlo listened in religious silence to this conversation between his father and the owner of the *Restaurant au Bord du Lac*.

He knew well his father’s passion for good food and wine and he never dared to interfere with his choices, on the other hand, he had never regretted them, quite the opposite.

*“Well Carlo, that’s enough talk about coins and dead people. What about that Madame Thérèse Milaud you spoke of, you told me what she said and what she did, but not what she looks like.”*

Carlo recognised his father’s expression, apart from good food and wine and Cuban cigars, he also had an evident passion for the graces of the fair sex. Even before his wife died he had not precisely been a good example for catechists, but at least he did his best to save appearances, now that the dear lady had left him a widow, he did not feel the need to hide his adventures and spoke openly to his son, who having overcome his initial embarrassment, now played along.

“Ah yes, she is quite stunning! It’s a pity she is in America! She is tall, obviously not as tall as me and you, a brunette, with green eyes. I think she must be in her late twenties and...”

“...and?”

“She looks younger and has a wonderful... a wonderful bearing. I don’t think she is married.”

“Well, that’s no problem anyway!”

“Father!”

“Oh come on!”

“I don’t think she’s married, or she could be divorced.”

“So, did you invite her out to dinner, at least? Ha! Do I have to teach you everything?” groused Siro, laughing.

They were interrupted by the waiters bringing the pike *alla mantovana*, which completely occupied their thoughts for the next quarter of an hour.

### *Locarno – 15<sup>th</sup> April 1929*

Carlo was sitting in the usual café in Piazza Grande, with his friend Eugenio.

After the morning and lunch in the company of his father, discussing matters that seemed to him surreal and incredible, he needed the comfort of a person who was both a friend and one he deeply admired for his pragmatic nature. He told Eugenio about his adventures in Paris and what both the “Polish-Neapolitan” and his father had told him about the coins.

“Eugenio, do you think I am stupid to doubt this story? After all, I am beginning to believe it, too. I am beginning to think there may be some truth in it somewhere. Did anything like that ever happen to you?”

Eugenio stared at him silently for some time, then he stubbed his cigarette and sighed.

“You know that I find it difficult to believe in God, above all in the one proposed by the priests, but I must admit that at times I think back to something that

happened many years ago and I am not so certain. I never spoke to you about it, perhaps because we have never had the opportunity and not because I was ashamed or because I thought you would make fun of me.

I was fifteen years old and we had returned, as we always did in summer, to Casapinta in Italy, the village where my parents were born, near Masserano. In the evening, we were sitting in the courtyard with some other people, enjoying the cool evening air and telling stories to pass the time. I and some other kids decided to play at calling up the spirits with a drinking glass. Do you know how it works? You take a piece of paper and you write the letters of the alphabet on it, then everyone puts a finger on the glass... it moves around and it writes words or phrases.

It always ends up with silly sentences and lots of laughs. That evening we asked about a person with a bad reputation who had recently died. The flame of the candle we were using for light left the wick and hovered for a moment, it seemed eternal to me, before returning to its rightful place.

We threw everything aside in fright and rushed back to the adults, who made fun of us for the rest of the evening.

Every so often I think about it, and I can't explain it. Then, one morning I was in Zurich at the *Polytechnikum*, giving an example that would not raise any suspicions, I asked my chemistry lecturer, a luminary from French Switzerland, whether this could happen, in theory. Initially he looked at me as though he thought I was making fun of him, then seeing that I was serious, he asked, speaking in German, perhaps to make his question sound more scornful, '*Herr Fantone, haben Sie zufaellig Frühstück mit Schnaps heute gehabt...oder was?*' (Mr Fantone, did you by chance breakfast on grappa, or what?).

I only know that I had to retake that examination a number of times. I'm not trying to avoid answering your question. I don't want to seem presumptuous but a quotation from Shakespeare seems to fit the case, do you remember Hamlet?

*'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'*

All in all, I don't believe so, but... I can't say that what you have told me is not true."

*Locarno – 16<sup>th</sup> April 1929*

Following this meeting with his friend Eugenio, whom he had hoped would transmit some of his usual pragmatism, Carlo returned to the office to deal with some correspondence that he had neglected during his stay in Paris. That was his intention, at least, but his father Siro stuck his head round the door and, without saying a word, beckoned him into his office.

"This morning I, so to speak, *forgot* to show you something. You know that I love theatrical gestures and I like a *coup de theatre*. Well, you must know that when Meralli, the bookbinder, began working on the binding of the book, he found an object hidden in a space that had been cut into the inside of the cover. Without wasting time, he called me and together we extracted what had been crammed into that space. See for yourself."

Siro opened the drawer of his desk and took out a package, a folded cloth; to Carlo it looked like a handkerchief.

Then, with a theatrical gesture, Siro slowly began to unfold the cloth until he had revealed the object it wrapped.

"Bloody... blooming heck!" Carlo corrected himself immediately, knowing that his father, despite his libertine character, hated swearing.

"Yes, it is exactly what you are thinking. It is the eleventh coin, the one that he minted for the family and which was handed down from generation to generation, until all trace of it was lost. I don't think it was Jacopo, the author of the manuscript who put it there. I think it was done later, perhaps by someone who feared they would not be able to look after it properly."

"But if it has been in our family for so long without doing harm or causing catastrophes that means that..."

"...that the entire story of bad luck is a hoax?" asked Siro.



“Well, It would seem so, unless...”

“...unless?” asked Siro in a tone that is asking for an answer they already know.

“Unless we, I mean our family, are immune in some way.”

Siro picked up the coin, turning it in his fingers, then he flicked it towards Carlo who, surprised caught it and looked questioningly at his father.

Guffawing, Siro told him that if they did not meet the next morning, he would know that, unfortunately, the evil spell was confirmed and that his son was not immune.

Carlo shook his head, but just to be sure, he put his left hand behind his back and making a fist he repeated the superstitious gesture he had seen the very Neapolitan Monsieur Janowski make the week before at Drouot in Paris. Then he placed the coin on the cloth from which his father had taken it and told him to put it in the office safe.

### *Locarno – early autumn 1929*

The summer had passed quietly; Carlo had almost forgotten the question of the coin and the misfortunes it was said to cause and he had finally managed to dedicate himself to his favourite activity, buying and selling pictures and furnishings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

He had visited Paris and Hôtel Drouot repeatedly and was even thinking of opening an office in the French capital, employing someone who could take on all those boring bureaucratic activities linked to the organisation of shipping to the warehouse in Locarno of the goods he had purchased at the auctions.

He had also had the opportunity to see Mr Janowski again, with whom he had discussed topics that interested him regarding the numismatic market, of which he knew little but where he could see opportunities for good profits. Mr Janowski had shown himself to be both willing and competent and he had given him valuable advice on bids to make during the coming auctions, on coins that in his opinion would give considerable satisfaction.

The months of July and August, thanks to the conspicuous presence of wealthy tourists from northern Europe and the States, had kept him very busy on the home front and the sales that he and his father had made during that period had brought profits that would allow them to live quietly until the next summer and beyond.

Now that the tourists had left, their traditional local clientele began to reappear, and was welcomed by Siro. Carlo, on the other hand, was beginning his new campaign at the auctions in Paris, where he would be able to build up the stock in the warehouse they had almost emptied during that extraordinary summer season.

At the end of October, after his return from Lyon, where he had successfully taken part in an exceptional auction of the furnishings from an eighteenth-century palace, Carlo received a telegram from the United States of America.

### *Locarno – 31<sup>st</sup> October 1929*

The news that Siro and Carlo were reading in the newspapers was worrying. The daily newspaper *La Stampa*, published in Torino, of 30<sup>th</sup> October carried the headline ‘New York Stock Exchange in ruins’, while the *New York Herald*, printed in Paris, said, ‘16,419,000 Shares Turned Over And Billions In Values Lost’.

The American stock exchange had collapsed but no one had yet understood the full extent of the catastrophe that was to follow.

Carlo had just returned from Lyon and he had read the report from the *Zürcher Zeitung* on the train, thinking above all that the following summer they would see few of the American tourists who had contributed to their successful sales this year.

It was then that he noticed the telegram. It had arrived the previous day and Siro, as he usually did when anything was addressed to Carlo, had left it unopened on his desk. It came from America and, although he did not know what it said,

merely the fact that it came from New York sent a shiver down his spine. He tore open the seal and read it. A telegram is by its very nature syncopated and tends to generate anxiety, but this time the words used amplified and transmitted the anguish of the person who had sent it. It was dated 29/10/29 and it was written in English.

VANBUREN BROKE STOP \_ URGENTLY NEED TO SELL COIN  
STOP \_ CAN MEET YOU IN PARIS NOV 9? STOP \_ T MILAUD

“Who is it from? What does it say?” asked Siro casually as Carlo continued to stare at the strips of paper glued to the greyish form from the federal postal service.

“Well? Have you fallen asleep?” snapped Siro.

“It’s from Madame Milaud. She says that van Buren, the American who paid so much for the famous coin is bankrupt and wonders whether we are interested in buying it.”

“Who is asking?”

“Well, it is signed Milaud, that’s Thérèse.”

“Do you think she’s doing it on her own initiative? Let’s think about it and then we’ll answer,” said Siro.

“There’s not much time to think about it: she wrote on the twenty-ninth and says she will be in Paris on the ninth. Therefore...” Carlo got up and rummaged through the newspapers from the past few days until he found the one he was looking for, with the dates of the ships sailing from New York to Le Havre.

“...now, if she takes the *Île-de-France* which leaves tomorrow, she will be in Le Havre on November sixth. There’s no time to answer, I will go and meet her in Paris.”

He got up to go to the post office, but Siro called him back.

“Think carefully before you buy... and if you decide it is worth it, try to bring home more than just the coin.”

Carlo glared at him and left the office huffing.

He sent a telegram to be delivered to Thérèse Milaud when she disembarked at

Le Havre, in which he asked her to get in touch with him at the Hôtel Millennium as soon as she arrived in Paris.

### *Nantes – 25<sup>th</sup> October 1929*

The gendarmerie prison van was transferring a group of high-security prisoners from the prison in Ports de Nantes to a navy ship, which would dump them at the penal colony of Île-de-Ré, a small island off the Atlantic coast in front of La Rochelle. The colony was the staging post for prisoners condemned to hard labour and destined for French Guyana: it was known by the locals as the *guillotine sèche* since it frequently led to the same conclusion as the instrument that became so sadly famous during the revolution of 1782, though without shedding any blood.

The van had a large wooden cabin with a small door on one side. Four padlocks secured the door. It was preceded by other military vehicles packed with soldiers carrying rifles ready to fire if necessary.

There were eight prisoners in the wooden cabin, all handcuffed, chained to the benches and watched by armed guards sitting on the benches around the walls. These precautions were not excessive since all the prisoners were thugs sentenced for robberies involving casual violence. They had also been involved more recently in new episodes of violence and an attempted escape during a revolt in the prison of Lille.

Jean-Luc Benoit gazed absently through the little window of the cabin, watching the houses of the suburbs of Nantes as they inevitably fell behind, emphasising the imminent and definitive detachment between himself and his French homeland.

Jean-Luc thought about this land that he had loved so dearly, he had even been prepared to die for it when the War broke out, lying about his age, he had enrolled at sixteen, asking to fight in the front lines. By the end of the war, he had won a medal for bravery and valour, a few wounds and the rank of corporal

and realised that his country no longer cared about him. The homeland had shaken his hand, sent a letter saying that he had done his duty and that after all he should be grateful that he had come home in one piece.

He had found himself alone and penniless, and since he had never been anything but a soldier, having previously kept body and soul together with a few minor robberies and casual work, he wondered how he was supposed to live. In the end, he found a job as a porter and since he was smart, they soon gave him the management, and given his experience with weapons, the custody of a warehouse for quality wool fleeces at Tourcoing.

His position allowed him to lead a comfortable life; he rented a modest house and married an attractive girl, despite her parents' objections. However, he too was discontented, it seemed to him that he should have more and it made him angry to see all that wool pass before him, when he knew that it was worth a fortune and he only received a salary that he considered inadequate. Finally, his resentment led him to a double life: by day a guard, by night a thief.

Soon his activity was noticed, unfortunately for him, not by the gendarmerie, but by the local criminals who first threatened and then ensnared him. During a major theft organised in the warehouse where he was responsible for the surveillance, there was a shoot-out and one of his men was killed.

The *Suretè* did not take long to find out the truth and get him to confess. He was sentenced first for murder and later (the reason he did not go to the guillotine) his sentence was transformed into conspiracy to commit murder: ten years in the prison of Lille. It was the end of the month of January in the year nineteen twenty-two. He lost everything: his comfortable life, his freedom and above all his wife, who fled in shame and went to live elsewhere, hiding her tracks.

In the early days of September of this year, when he had only a little more than a year to go before his release, a revolt broke out in the Lille prison and Jean-Luc was wrongly identified as one of the leaders: he was tried immediately and sentenced to a further ten years, this time to be served overseas in Cayenne.

Through the window of the van, he could see the Loire as it wound towards the

sea, the sea that would pursue him like a curse for the coming years, if he managed to survive. They were in the centre of the city and the traffic that he had never bothered to glance at before now seemed suddenly detailed and almost beautiful.

There was a sudden explosion and he was catapulted towards his companions, the world was upside down, the van had turned over and the wall was torn away, leaving a wide space right below him; he could see the paving stones.

He looked around blearily and saw all the other prisoners piled at the opposite end of the cage, unconscious and bleeding.

He pulled the chain that fastened him to the bench and realised that it had come away in the crash, he still had iron shackles on his ankles, but they allowed him to walk, all he had to do was keep them hidden. He quickly slipped out of the cage and slid under the van.

He looked around and was that he was in the railway junction of the port: the military vehicle had accidentally been hit by one of the small steam locomotives used for shunting wagons around the wharfs. The locomotive had also turned over and was leaking smoke and steam: it was a hellish scene that reminded him of certain moments during the war.

There were bodies on the ground and he could hear the shouts of the rescuers, the swearing and laments of the wounded, the sharp orders of the soldiers who had dismounted unprepared for this absolutely unforeseeable event.

He understood that he would never have another opportunity. Seeing a muddy puddle, he rolled in it to camouflage his prison garb as far as possible and pulled down his trousers to hide the shackles, then he got up and behaving as if he were a worker involved in the accident, he mingled with the crowd that was forming. The disorder and confusion helped him to sneak away and he took advantage to slip under a train of goods wagons that was slowly moving off: he noticed that the panel on the side indicated the journey as *Nantes-Poitiers*. He jumped into the first open wagon and hid under some empty canvas sacks.

## *Le Havre – November 6<sup>th</sup> 1929*

The gendarmerie were hunting the escaped prisoner throughout the country; he realised that all the railway stations would be patrolled by the police and that his photograph would have been sent to all the stationmasters. Despite this, thanks to his caution and with a little luck, he had managed to cross France going north and reach the place he had chosen to start a new life.

He had arrived in the port of Le Havre and there he intended to stow away on a cargo ship sailing across the ocean: no one would come and look for him in America.

Also, while he was in prison in Lille, he had made friends with a lad from Le Havre and done him a few favours: Armel, who was doing five years for smuggling and had been released the previous year. He moved cautiously through the slums around the port, he went into the taverns to ask for Armel, the one who *had lived* in Lille for five years.

He had risked being on the receiving end of a few punches, but finally someone told him to go to the first street on the side of the Vauban dock at nine that evening. It was dark and no one was around, at first he thought he had been taken for a ride, when he suddenly saw four brawny thugs appear before him. He heard a noise behind him and realised that he was surrounded, they were all armed, some with docker's hooks used for impaling and carrying jute sacks on the shoulder, others with long knives that glinted in the light of the streetlamps.

“Well, well, who would have thought it: a ghost!”

Armel approached Jean-Luc, stared into his eyes and poked him in the chest with his forefinger.

“No, it's not a ghost! It's really him! Put your irons away!”

Then he grabbed Jean-Luc and embraced him roughly. As he released him, he asked, “What the hell are you doing here?”

Jean-Luc stared at him. “I don't really know. It's a long story.”

“Well, come on inside and we'll have a drink, then you can tell me all about it.”

“Haven’t you got anything to eat? I haven’t eaten for three days.”

“All right, come on, we have all the night before us.”

He had not eaten and drunk so well for almost ten years. He had spent the night with Armel, telling him about the revolt at the prison, that he had nothing to do with it, but that he had been accused and sentenced spend time in the Cayenne island prison.

He told him about the crash with the steam train and how, hiding on the wagons of the goods trains and constantly changing trains, he had managed to get as far as Le Havre and why he had gone there: he wanted to go to America.

Armel said that he was crazy, that America was going to the dogs, and that all the Americans were moving to Europe.

Then, in the end, Armel said, “I will do anything you ask me, I owe you for all the favours you did me that allowed me to get out early. There is a cargo ship leaving in a week’s time, I will get you on board without anyone knowing because the captain... works for me. You know what I mean? Good! Keep your mouth shut. Now go and sleep. Tomorrow I will find you some decent clothes, a bit of money and everything you need for the journey. I will get rid of the cuffs you had on your ankles.”

“No,” said Jean-Luc, “leave one with me, I will put it in my bag and take it with me as a souvenir.”

### *Le Havre – November 7<sup>th</sup> 1929*

Armel accompanied him to the ship, where he introduced him to the captain, then he hugged him. “*Adieu* ghost. Perhaps we will meet again one day.”

He turned and slipped away. That was the second time Armel had called him ‘ghost’: what was that about?

Waiting for the cargo ship to weigh the anchor, he asked the captain if it would be dangerous to go for a walk round the port and was told that there was so much activity that if he took care not to attract attention he would be all right.



That morning a large steamship had docked nearby, the *Île-de-France*. She was truly enormous and he mingled curiously with the onlookers and the relatives waiting for the passengers to disembark.

From the style of their clothing, it looked as though the second-class passengers were disembarking; there were plenty of beautiful women... one of them struck him particularly. It can't be, he thought to himself. He followed her discreetly until he saw that a porter was accompanying her to the exit with her baggage. He looked around, saw a boy with an intelligent air and said to him, "Can you read?"

"Of course, sir."

"Then go near to that lady down there with the light blue dress..."

"The old one?"

"Nooo! The tall young lady. The one with the white hat!"

"All right."

Then he gave the boy a piece of paper and a pencil stub.

"Write down on here the name and address on the luggage label on the trunk. Can you see it?"

The boy nodded but did not move; Jean-Luc looked at him and showed him a twenty-centime coin.

The boy tried to snatch it, but he said, "When you come back with the note!"

The boy rushed away and was soon back; Jean-Luc read the note and gave the coin to the kid, who wandered away with a brief thank you.

Now he had a clear idea of what he was going to do, and where to find his wife and get her back, whether she wanted to come or not.

*Paris – November 9<sup>th</sup> 1929*

Thérèse Milaud had arrived from in Paris from Le Havre the previous day and was staying at the Hôtel Angleterre, a decent Hôtel, but certainly not the first class establishment she had stayed at last time. The financial situation had

changed and Nick, Mr van Buren, had apologised that he could not afford anything better.

Van Buren hoped that he could sell the coin for at least half the price he had paid for it. With one hundred French francs, he would be able to plug a few holes and maybe that one of the banks would once again grant him credit.

Thérèse had received Carlo's telegram and they had made an appointment for lunchtime: the taxi stopped in front of the Hôtel Angleterre and Carlo, asking the driver to wait for him, entered to ask for Madame Milaud.

Thérèse was already waiting in the lobby: Carlo recognised her immediately, perhaps her concerns had made her lose a little weight, but this just made her even more alluring.

"Signor Fantone, do you remember me?"

How could I forget, thought Carlo to himself, trying to keep his calm, and with a forced smile he came out with a banal, "Of course I remember Madame Milaud, one never forgets such a charming lady... and one so capable in the world of numismatics."

"You flatter me, Signor Fantone."

I know what I would like to do, thought Carlo, but fortunately, he only managed to say, "It is only the truth, Madame."

Then, offering his arm, he said, "The taxi is waiting for us, let's go and have lunch, so that we can speak in peace about our business."

They got into the car and Carlo said to the driver, "*Au Gran Café des Capucines, s'il vous plait.*"

The Gran Café was a restaurant on the Boulevard des Capucines, not far from Opéra. The furnishings were in an opulent Art Nouveau style, very fussy and perhaps this was precisely why Carlo, who was normally moderate and reserved, considered this restaurant one of those little excesses that he sometimes granted himself.

Between courses, Thérèse explained to Carlo the dramatic situation in which the American economist found himself and his state of almost total bankruptcy since

the value of half a dozen companies in which he had invested heavily had been reduced almost to nil in the last couple of weeks.

“Nick, that is to say Mr van Buren, had to sell his office at a ridiculous price, however, unfortunately that will only cover part of his debt and has begun to sell off his coin collection and I don’t know if he will be able to keep his house on Park Avenue much longer. That is why I am here, I wondered if you might be interested in purchasing, at a reasonable price, the coin we both bid on a few months ago.”

Carlo waited a moment, sipping his coffee before he answered, “Madame Milaud, or may I call you Thérèse?”

She nodded.

“Well Thérèse, there are a number of reasons why I can see various obstacles to your plan. The first is myself. Not because I don’t want to oblige you, but because I can’t. The sum that I had originally set aside to invest in the coin was only twenty-five thousand francs, I actually offered thirty thousand, hoping to put off any competitors, but your offer of two hundred thousand absolutely amazed me. I am sure that you were following the instructions you had been given, collectors tend to become overwrought and compulsive, but I am not a collector, and in any case, my interest was... different. Given the sum you paid, I certainly can’t make you an offer without offending yourself and Mr van Buren.”

Thérèse sighed. “That was the answer I feared, after all, it is true. I personally told Nick that the sum was way over the top. Nevertheless, would you help me to find a buyer?”

Carlo looked at her for a moment and to gain time he asked,

“Forgive me Thérèse, do you mind if I smoke a cigar?”

“No, of course not, Carlo, no problem, Nick smokes them all the time.”

The continual reference to van Buren as Nick was beginning to irritate Carlo, was she his fiancée or his mistress? He was beginning to suffer from a curious form of jealousy.

“As far as the possibility of selling the coin is concerned, believe me Thérèse,

but this is the second point that I mentioned before. I think it will be very difficult, almost impossible to sell it and you will find it equally difficult to believe the reasons.”

Carlo puffed on his cigar and told Thérèse of the sequence of curious deaths and mishaps that had befallen the owners of that and the other coins over the years.

At first, Thérèse listened in amusement, and then as the story unfolded her mood changed from impatience to anger.

“Oh come on, Signor Fantone, do you really want me to swallow this... this...”

“Tomfoolery?” asked Carlo. “No, Thérèse, I don’t ask you to believe in something that even I don’t believe in. The fact is that there are people who believe in these superstitions and want nothing to do with that coin! Go and ask Monsieur Janowski at the Hôtel Drouot, or anyone else who deals in coins at a certain level, here in Paris: you will get the same answer.”

“Then why did nothing happen to Monsieur Janowski, who handled the coin, or to myself, since I transported it?”

“Because, and this is the answer that Mr Janowski gave me personally when I asked the same question, it does not belong to you.”

Carlo paused, then gathering his courage he said, “It would seem, however, that there is an exception...”

“What is that?” asked Thérèse

“With regard to my father, who has for some time owned one of the coins, without suffering any harm.”

He began to tell her the story of the book and the discovery of the hidden items.

“According to my father, our immunity could depend on the fact that we are closely related to the person who minted the coin.”

Thérèse stared at him, her eyes narrowed, unsure whether to laugh or scream.

“No, please, Thérèse don’t look like that, it is a theory that even my father who brought it up does not believe. The point is not to convince ourselves, but others, those who could afford to buy it and do not want to do so.”

Thérèse asked him how long he would be staying in Paris and he said that he

would be there for a fortnight and gave her the visiting card of his Hôtel, so that she could call him if she needed.

### *Paris – November 10<sup>th</sup> 1929*

Thérèse was upset by her meeting with Carlo Fantone the previous day. She had imagined that it would not be easy to sell the coin back to him, but she certainly would never have imagined that he would try to bamboozle her with all that nonsense. He wanted to buy the coin for a song, that's what the gallant Signor Carlo was up to!

She left her Hôtel determined to find a solution, but first she would phone Monsieur Janowski at the Drouot auction house to fix an appointment for the afternoon.

She spend the morning visiting the main numismatic dealers, saying that she was representing an American collector who wanted to purchase a coin like the one sold at auction on April 13<sup>th</sup>.

A couple of the dealers, who had been present at the auction, recognised Thérèse, preventing her from playing her cards.

Another three made witty remarks about the legend that surrounded the coin, but that they did not know anyone who had one to sell. The last one was more categorical.

“Certainly, there is no one here in Europe. You could try in America, Madame. Perhaps the van Buren heirs will want to sell the one he purchased recently, because it would seem that it didn't bring him much luck!”

“Why do you say that?” asked Thérèse worriedly.

“Why? Don't you read the newspapers? I mean your national press.”

As he spoke, he pulled a copy of the European edition of the New York Herald out of a drawer. He glanced at the front page, folded the newspaper and handed it to Thérèse, pointing at a brief article in bold type.

#### **The death of van Buren**

**[...] what is more, the news of the death of the well-known financier Klaas**

**van Buren shocked the financial world yesterday. It would seem that he committed suicide after the collapse of his financial empire...**

“That is why...,” said the shopkeeper, but he fell silent when he saw the anguished face of his customer, who said nothing, but snatched the newspaper and fled from the shop.

Overwhelmed, Thérèse returned swiftly to her Hôtel nearby, in a side street off Boulevard des Italiens.

As soon as she entered the lobby, she threw herself into an armchair and began to weep. Then she remembered her meeting with Mr Fantone and looked for the card he had given her a day earlier: Hôtel Millennium. She asked the receptionist if it was far away and was far away and was told that it was only five minutes on foot.

The concierge at the Hôtel Millennium opened the door for her and Thérèse went to the reception to ask if Monsieur Fantone was in the Hôtel: when she received confirmation, she asked that he be advised that Madame Milaud was waiting for him in the *salon de thé*.

Thérèse’s expression was sufficient for Carlo to realise that something serious had happened.

Thérèse did not speak, she simply handed Carlo the copy of the New York Herald, pointing to the article that mentioned van Buren.

Carlo muttered a very Italian “*Oh cazzo!*” of which, fortunately, understood only the tone of surprise.

Carlo very delicately placed his hand on Thérèse’s telling her to be calm and not to worry, that he and his father would give her all the help they could. Carlo ordered a tea for her and a cognac for himself and tried to distract her by asking how she had spent the morning and how her search for a potential buyer was going.

Thérèse listened in silence, shaking her head. Then suddenly she gathered her wits and said to Carlo, “I met five shopkeepers and I did not ask them to buy the coin, but rather to sell me a similar one. No one has a coin, but every one of

them, I repeat, every one, told me or gave me to understand that they would never ever keep it in the shop. The last one, I think he was called Moratian, told me to ask the van Buren heirs to sell me theirs. When I asked why, he simply produced the newspaper from a drawer.”

Carlo nodded.

“I know Moratian and I can assure you that he is a good person, but unfortunately for him, he saw terrible scenes before he was able to flee from his homeland and he has become rather cynical.”

“So, all those stories that you told me yesterday are true!” said Thérèse in the tone of someone who hopes to receive a negative response.

“Thérèse, quite frankly, I would like to be able to say no, but... I just don’t know. Certainly, the case of Mr van Buren is unusual because, if we want to believe in the evil spell, the coin has had a delayed effect.”

Just at that moment, a bellboy from the Hôtel came over and asked, “Madame Milaud? A messenger from the Hôtel Angleterre asked me to give you this urgent letter, saying that it arrived just after you left.”

*Paris – November 10<sup>th</sup> 1929*

*Mrs Thérèse Milaud  
C/o Hôtel Angleterre  
Paris*

*New York, November 6<sup>th</sup> 1929*

*Dear Terry,*

*When you receive this letter, you will certainly have read the newspapers and so it is useless to explain.*

*I am completely ruined, and not even the sale of the coin can save me.*

*You know how I feel about life and that I could not bear to survive on a few dollars.*

*Keep the coin as compensation for everything you have done for me and for the affection that has bound us, but I beg you to sell it immediately, because I believe that keeping it brings bad luck.*

*Adieu,*

*Nick*

*Paris – November 10<sup>th</sup> 1929*

Thérèse wept silently and Carlo passed her his handkerchief. She took it and

handed him the letter she had just received.

Carlo asked for permission to read it and she nodded.

After he had finished reading it, Carlo asked, "Was he your fiancé?"

Thérèse lifted her head and despite the tears in her eyes, she gave a brief laugh.

"Who? Nick? No, I could never have..."

"Forgive me, but it seems to be in such a confidential tone..."

"It is, because I am... I was... his best friend. You see Signor Fantone, Nick, he... I... I was, so to say, his... sentimental confidant. He would ask me what I thought about John, or Bob, or whoever... who was more handsome?!"

"Ah!" said Carlo.

"Yes! He preferred the company of men and when he met someone he liked, he would take me into his confidence. He was a wonderful person."

Then she became gloomy once again and remained silent, staring into space.

"Excuse me if I am interfering with your private affairs, but what do you intend to do? Have you any contacts here in France? Do you intend to go back to America; do you need any help with your travel plans?"

Her eyes on her hands clasped on the table, Thérèse began to speak.

"As you will have imagined, I am not American, I went there almost ten years ago. At the time I was living in Lille, I was married and led a quiet life, and then suddenly my world was overturned. I discovered that my husband was leading a double life, but not with a mistress, he was mixed up with the underworld and he ended up in prison. For me it was the start of a nightmare and I thought I could escape by asking for a divorce, but it was not granted and I found not only his family, but mine too against me.

Jean-Luc had been in prison for six months, my life was miserable, the war was just over and there were still a lot of foreign soldiers around. The little English I had learned at school was sufficient to get me a post at the American hospital, where I looked after the wounded soldiers waiting to be sent home. That is where I met Nick. He was badly wounded in the leg and he still... he always limped. At first I thought that he was exaggerating the problem so that he could



lean on me and hug me, but it didn't take me long to understand that women did not interest him, except as friends. I told him about my life and he told me about his and about his plans: he had plenty; he was a torrent of surprising new ideas! We spent three months together, then he was given his orders to return home and he told me that if he said I was his fiancée, he could take me with him to the States. I had nothing to lose and a lot to forget in France, so I accepted.

When we arrived in New York, we were given a joyous welcome by his parents, who were pleased to see that he had changed... his tastes: they just wanted us to get married, but that never happened.

He immediately began playing the Stock Exchange and he was very skilled and ruthless, he involved me in his dealings and within a year we were rich, very rich.

However, his world was a jungle where tens of thousands of dollars changed hands at dizzying speed. I asked him to stop, but he didn't and so, to avoid being caught up in his speculations, he asked me to leave the company and become his assistant, with an amazing salary. Thanks to this, we became even closer. They were fantastic years, I was leading a life that I could never have dreamed of and I confess that I spent a fortune in clothes, hats, jewellery and entertainment.

Then, in July this year the first problems appeared, worsening until October 28<sup>th</sup> when our world collapsed. Nick was desperate and he asked me to sell the coin. He had already pawned his collection. In recognition of all he had done for me, I gave him all my savings to try one last desperate operation: now I know that that money also flew out of the window. I set out with the money necessary to stay one week in France and then I intended to return to America."

She interrupted her story, raised her glance and stared Carlo in the eyes.

"Mr Fantone, in my pocket I have a return ticket to the States, but it is now no use to me, a coin that is worth nothing and one hundred dollars in traveller's cheques. That is my situation. Oh, I forgot, since I am in France, there is also the risk that my husband will come looking for me: he never accepted the fact that I had left him."

*November 10<sup>th</sup> 1929*

Jean-Luc was amazed to see Thérèse disembark from a luxury steamship, she certainly hadn't travelled first class but even travelling in second class was a luxury that they could never have afforded.

He had thought that she was returning from a holiday, but the fact that her baggage was destined for a hotel in Paris meant that she would be returning to America: her new home.

Like a knife thrust, the thought flitted through his mind that she might have remarried in America, without anyone knowing that she had never divorced, but if that were so, she would have been in the company of her husband, or at least she would have carried his name, while the luggage label said Milaud, her maiden name.

Then he thought that since Thérèse was a smart girl, she had made a position for herself in America and maybe a small fortune... of which a part belonged to him: wasn't he still her husband, after all?

He smiled to himself: Thérèse I am on my way.

*Paris – November 1929*

Madame Antonelli was a lady who looked much younger than her seventy-odd years because, more for herself than for others, she tried as well as she could to keep up appearances and the tone of one who conducts a comfortable bourgeois existence.

The events of the war first of all, the economic crisis afterwards and the recent death of her husband, George, had slowly reduced her economic resources to the point where she had decided to rent out some rooms of her house in rue du Sentier, in the second *arrondissement*. For a question of decency, as she put it, she only accepted female boarders. A few days earlier, an English teacher had left her most spacious room, the one that had been George's study.

The new boarder was very elegant; she was attractive and spoke perfect French although with a slight American accent. Madame Antonelli thought she was Canadian and was surprised when Madame Milaud gave her a French identity card that showed she was born in Hem, a town near Lille.

The cost of the Hôtel had become too expensive for Thérèse, who risked frittering away that reserve of one hundred dollars that, if well guarded, would guarantee her a minimum of serenity until she found a job.

To her great surprise, thanks to her knowledge of English and also thanks to a recommendation by Madame Antonelli, she found a post as a teacher at a boarding school for young ladies of good family. However, there was no hope of selling the notorious coin. After the first refusals, she had prudently stopped asking: the world of the numismatic dealers was limited and even the rumour that a valuable item like a coin purchased for two hundred thousand francs led to plenty of gossip amongst the Parisian merchants and beyond.

Carlo Fantone had suggested that she work for him, since he intended to open an office in Paris, but Thérèse wanted to stand on her own two feet and keep her distance, as far as possible, from that loathsome object. She had begun to think that it really was jinxed!

On November twenty-seventh something happened that really upset her: it was six in the evening and she was returning to Madame Antonelli's house from the school where she worked. She was walking along a dark street when a man attacked her and dragged her into a doorway with the intention of raping her. Her screams were heard by a coalman who had just made his delivery and he grabbed his shovel, jumping down from his cart to grab the attacker by the jacket and throw him to the ground, but before the coalman could strike him, the man got to his feet and fled.

Thérèse, panting with fear, looked at her rescuer and said in a tiny voice, "How can I thank you enough?"

The man answered that he had only done what any man worthy of the name would have done, and above all, he insisted that she should not take that street

again, because it had a bad reputation.

She returned home very upset, where Madame Antonelli helped her to undress and ran a hot bath for her. Apart from her disgust for the contact with that individual, she had the very unpleasant sensation, perhaps influenced by memories that sometimes returned when she was tense, that she had recognised in the form and the behaviour of the person who had attacked her, the features of her husband. Yet it could not be her husband, because he was still in prison, and he had another two years to serve. She was certain of this because Nick, before he left France last April, had asked for information through the American Embassy in Paris.

### *Paris – November 29<sup>th</sup> 1929*

“Madame Milaud, you must realise that the reputation of our institute must not even be shadowed by the doubt that one of our teachers is not conducting an unimpeachable life.”

The headmistress of the boarding school for young ladies of good family, Sister Ermeline, had called Thérèse to her study urgently, as soon as she heard of the attack.

Thérèse was staring at her in amazement.

“What were you doing in that street and what did you do to cause the reaction of your... shall we call him your attacker?”

Thérèse said nothing and continued to stare at the nun with rage that it was difficult to hide.

“Do you realise that your behaviour has damaged the reputation of our holy institution? You are fired! You should be ashamed of yourself!”

All the other teachers on the board were silent and had fixed their gaze on the ground. Thérèse approached the headmistress and looking her up and down she whispered in a chilling tone, “A whited sepulchre, that’s what you are, a whited sepulchre.”

Then she turned to the other teachers.

“If you don’t know what that means, it is written in a book that you have probably been forbidden to read in here, because it says unfitting things.”

Before any one of them could speak, she went out of the door, descended the main staircase and left the school, so angry that even tears would not come.

She returned home and told the whole story to Madame Antonelli, who made her sit on the sofa in the best parlour, took her maternally in her arms and finally let her weep until she hiccupped. After a while, she shook her with a complicit air.

“I would give a hundred francs to have been there and seen their faces! I can imagine their expressions and the comments they made with those duckfaces”.

Thérèse raised her head and looked at her perplexedly.

“Oh, they are not worth bothering with, my dear. Anyway, a young woman must think of her future. You have the world before you. By the way...”

Thérèse waited expectantly.

“By the way,” repeated the old lady. “That Italian gentleman you spoke of...”

“He’s not Italian, he is Swiss.”

“Italian, Swiss, it is not important where he comes from. My George was Belgian and we were happy anyway. However, I must not digress, why don’t you accept his offer? Perhaps, sooner or later, he will make you another... of a different kind.”

“Another? What kind?” asked Thérèse.

“Oh my goodness! You young people! Is your generation, with all your spouting about emancipation so naïve, or are you just pretending? Listen to me; try to make sure that you meet up with that gentleman tomorrow.”

“But can’t I just go and see him?” asked Thérèse bewilderedly.

“No, no, no! Ah forgive me; there are rules to be followed!

It was getting dark and Madame Antonelli asked Thérèse to turn on the lamp beside the sofa. Then she took her by the arm and they began a whispered conversation, with a lot of giggling.

*Paris – December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1929*

“Madame Milaud, what a surprise! How are you? Have you found a suitable place to live?”

Thérèse had spent three days discreetly following Carlo, in order to understand where he was to be found and choose the most suitable place in which, to use Madame Antonelli’s words, to ‘ambush him’.

They were standing before an elegant *salon de thé* on Boulevard Lafayette and to Carlo it seemed to be quite by chance that their paths had crossed. He invited her to have tea with him, but she, following Madame’s instructions, told him that she could not accept because she had an appointment. Then, when he insisted, she accepted: in Madame’s opinion, the game was now won.

It must be said, however, that in the days following the attack, Thérèse had begun to believe that the infamous piece of gold truly brought bad luck. Ever since Nick had purchased it, his fortunes had begun to decline, then financial ruin had followed and in the end, he had killed himself. She had, as soon as she became its owner, first attacked and then fired.

Thérèse kept these considerations to herself and told Carlo that she had found pleasant accommodation with Madame Antonelli and how content she was with her new teaching job.

“I am very pleased for you, although I would have preferred to hear that you had decided to accept my proposal. However, I will not give up and I hope that sooner or later you will change your mind.”

Thérèse did not answer, she simply gave a smile that encouraged Carlo to make a proposal he had in mind from the moment they had ‘casually’ met on the street. “The season has already begun at the Opéra, but the highlight this year will be Puccini’s *La Bohème*, where the part of Rodolfo will be sung by the Spanish tenor Lucas Cortes. Last year he drove the fans of Verdi wild at the Teatro Regio in Parma, playing Alfredo in *La Traviata*. I have the honour of being his friend, I met him when he was still making a name for himself and whenever I can, I go

to hear him sing.”

Thérèse listened to him, wondering what this lengthy preamble meant.

“Perhaps you don’t like opera?” Carlo asked worriedly.

“Of course I like it, although I am no expert, I was just wondering...”

Carlo did not allow her to finish her sentence.

“As I was saying, next Saturday, the fourteenth of December, my goodness ten days later it will be Christmas, there will be the premiere of *La Bohème* and I would... it would give me great pleasure... well, I would be very happy if you would accept my invitation.”

Thérèse sighed and with a sad smile she said,

“I would love to accept, but I’m afraid that I don’t have a suitable gown.”

“I would never dare to propose that you should accept a gown as a gift,” said Carlo, “but I can tell you where you can rent one at a reasonable cost: if you wish, I can accompany you.”

There was a moment’s silence, Carlo poured out a little more tea and Thérèse sipped it in silence, then she looked up and with a smile, she said.

“Thank you for the invitation, but...” she gave a pause worthy of a consummate actress “...but for the dress, I would prefer to go alone: could you write down the address for me?”

### *Paris- December 14<sup>th</sup> 1929*

Carlo had seen *La Bohème* in the company of Thérèse and other friends they had welcomed to their box. It had been a great success and the audience had *encored* the singers for at least twenty minutes.

Now, the evening continued with a gala reception in the foyer and Carlo was surprised how comfortable Thérèse appeared in this setting. He considered, quite rightly, that during the years she had spent in New York, Thérèse had often attended concerts and worldly social events. He, on the other hand, in these circumstances could only think of the past years and in particular of 1919.

He had been engaged to Elena for three years and together they attended all the worldly events in Milano. At the time, he was living there, because when he was called up at the start of the war, perhaps by chance or thanks to his father's influence, he was assigned as orderly to a high-ranking official at the military district. When the war ended, he remained in Milano because he was thinking of setting up home there, in fact, he and Elena had begun to consider getting married. On January 18<sup>th</sup> 1919, she became ill and a week later, she died: one of the many, innumerable victims of the epidemic of Spanish flu.

Carlo had never quite recovered from this tragedy, sentimentally. When his work allowed, he conducted a brilliant social life, but he always had a strange feeling of discomfort, as if he were in the wrong place or with the wrong person. That evening, for the first time in ten years, he did not feel uncomfortable.

“*Senor Fantone!*”

The voice was unmistakable; Carlo turned and faced the massive bulk and smiling face of the tenor Lucas Cortes, still reddened by the effort of his recent exhibition and the encores granted.

“Maestro Cortes, what an honour!”

“Maestro? Oh come on!” squeaked the tenor.

Carlo, who had met him in Milano when he was a promising young opera singer, had always wondered how his friend could encompass two personalities with such different voices. When he was singing, he had a powerful tenor voice that was making him famous all over the world, while when he conversed, his voice became surprisingly acute.

“Well,” continued Lucas, “what have you been doing for the last year? I haven't seen you since *La Traviata* last year in Milano!”

“I can hardly follow you around the world,” answered Carlo. “I have to work too, you know.”

“Yes, because in your opinion I...” then he stopped and took Carlo by the arm, whispering in his ear. “You old goat, why are you so unkind to your friends?”

Carlo merely said “Hey?” knowing well what Lucas was driving at.



“That beautiful woman who is with you? Have you decided to set up home?”

Carlo pulled him aside, then he looked around him and said, “I wish I could.”

Lucas stared at him in amazement. “Why? Doesn’t she want to?”

“I don’t know yet,” whispered Carlo.

Lucas’ powerful truly tenor guffaw made everyone turn around and curiously some even applauded.

“You see Carlo,” said Lucas, “I have become so famous that people applaud even when I laugh! Come, come, introduce me to the beautiful lady.”

“Don’t do anything silly, eh!”

“I couldn’t even if I wanted to: next week I will be in Berlin, I won’t even be able to spend Christmas peacefully at home!”

Carlo introduced Lucas to Thérèse, but he was soon carried off by admirers who wanted to enjoy his company.

The evening was drawing to a close when Lucas reappeared bringing with him a gentleman of curious appearance: apart from the cut of his clothing which was about thirty years out of date, totally black, with a high stiff collar and a black bow tie, it was his face that made him unsettling. His hair was raven black and his skin pale, contrasting strongly with the bluish shadows of his freshly shaven beard.

“Carlo, I would like to introduce to you and Madame Milaud,” he turned a magnificent smile on Thérèse, “a very dear friend of mine, also Spanish, Senor Francisco Bertrams.”

“Professor Bertrams!” exclaimed Thérèse in surprise.

“In person, Madame. I hope that you know me because you have attended one of my conferences,” said the professor in a deep warm voice.

“In effect, I was present at one of your demonstrations at the Carnegie Hall in New York, if I remember correctly... it was in autumn about two years ago.

“In effect, it was the eighteenth of September of nineteen twenty seven,” specified the professor.

“My friend,” continued Lucas, “wanted to meet Madame Milaud, but it seemed

inopportune to him to introduce himself.”

Carlo glanced at Lucas, who answered with a wave of the hand that meant ‘calm down, it’s all right.’

“I apologise also to you Mr Fantone, said Bertrams, “but you both have, in some way, something to do with an object in which I am very interested. Professionally, I mean.”

Both Thérèse and Carlo turned an interrogative gaze on the newcomer.

“I see from your expressions that you are surprised,” continued the professor in his deep voice. “Last April I was at the Hôtel Drouot to witness your battle over a gold coin of which I already knew the sad reputation and which I had examined for my studies. It was not, in fact, my intention to purchase the coin; I just wanted to examine it carefully, which was not possible in the presence of the representative of the house of Drouot. I had counted on contacting the purchaser, but I was told that Drouot never gives out such information.

This evening I recognised the lady, please forgive me Senor Fantone if I did not remember you: then, when I saw that the lady was speaking to my friend Cortes, I came forward.”

“Forgive me if I interrupt,” said Carlo, “but what exactly is your professional interest in the coin, if I may ask.”

Thérèse turned to Carlo. “I had the good fortune to attend a conference and an experiment by the professor when I was in New York. The professor believes that only a tiny part of the capacity of our brains is used and that these limits prevent us from perceiving many things.”

“For example?” asked Carlo.

“In that experiment the professor managed to make contact with a person who had died many years earlier.”

Carlo turned to the professor and with a perplexed expression asked, “Are you an oc-cul-tist?”

The professor lost the calm expression that had marked his features so far.

“I beg you not to call me an occultist; I consider the term highly offensive!”

“Forgive me, but...” Carlo tried to insist.

“My friend Cortes,” continued the professor regardless, “tells me that you are a well-known antiquarian. Well, would you be offended if someone referred to your profession as that of junk dealer? I would imagine so!”

The professor’s eloquence now knew no bounds.

“I have worked in Vienna with Professor Jung; I have held courses on the human psyche at the Universities of Berlin and Milano. I have had the good fortune, regrettably only shortly before his death, to meet Professor Lombroso, but in any case I had the privilege of reading a draft of his last book *Ricerche sui fenomeni ipnotici e spiritici*. Mr Fantone, believe me, this is science not a circus. There are, it is true, many charlatans who take advantage of the gullibility of the people to get money out of them: they ruin for a few francs, the work of many committed people.

I hold conferences for which I ask a fee, just like any of my colleagues who take part in a symposium. The participants who want to take part in an experiment, which normally follows my lesson, must book a place beforehand, because I allow the presence of not more than ten persons. Ah! I forgot to say that the experiments serve only to enrich my experience, not my pockets: they are free of charge. In effect,” he continued, “I should pay the participants because without their assistance, the experiment could not work.”

There was a moment’s silence, which was interrupted by the noisy return of Lucas Cortes, who in the meantime had been drawn away again by his fans.

“Well, was it a useful meeting?” he asked the professor.

“For the moment we have simply had the opportunity to clarify my profession,” said the professor, winking at Carlo who immediately said.

“Professor Bertrams, I hope that I can speak also for Madame Milaud when I propose a meeting in the next few days, perhaps at my hotel. Do you agree Thérèse?”

“Of course I agree. What about the day after tomorrow, Monday, in the afternoon at two?” asked Thérèse.

“Perfect,” chorused the two men.

“Well then, I will ensure that we have a private room available for two in the afternoon,” concluded Carlo.

After they had said their goodbyes to Professor Bertram, Lucas Cortes took Carlo and Thérèse by the arm to make what he had to say to them even more confidential.

“I beg you, do not underestimate the professor. He is a genius, a true genius. Don’t worry, above all you, Carlo, about his extravagant way of dressing in black that makes him look like a *porte-malheur*... you know, one who brings bad luck?”

A Jonah, yes he looks quite like an evil eye,” commented Carlo.

*Paris – December 16<sup>th</sup> 1929*

“Madame Milaud, may I ask if the coin is yours?” as soon as they were all sitting in the private room *XXI-me Siècle* that Carlo had booked.

“It is now. But previously it belonged to a dear friend, who is no longer with us...” answered Thérèse with a sorrowful and worried air.

The professor observed her waiting for her to continue, although it was clear what she meant by the unfinished phrase. Since Thérèse did not speak, the professor asked,

“Am I right in thinking that you are silent because the person in question died?”

Thérèse simply nodded.

“Was it a natural death or... a tragedy?”

Thérèse said nothing. She was overcome by profound sorrow.

“It was a tragedy, was it not? I was almost certain. You would do well to free yourself of that terrible inheritance,” said the professor bluntly, “and as quickly as possible, without thinking about it too much.”

Carlo started in his armchair, but he had no time to intervene, because the professor was exhorting Thérèse.

“How long have you possessed the coin?”

“Since I left America,” sighed Thérèse.

No, no. I mean, how long is it since you learned of the tragic demise of your friend?”

“Two weeks.”

“And in these two weeks, has everything gone well, have you had any problems? Have there been any unusual events?” The professor’s tone was alarmed and understanding.

Thérèse told him of the two events that had happened and to some extent the professor was relieved, because he considered them part of the possible risks of living in a big city.

“However,” continued Thérèse, “this morning...”

“What happened, Thérèse?” exclaimed Carlo startled. Thérèse lowered her gaze; she took a handkerchief from her sleeve and dried a tear.

“Today I intended to take the coin to be examined. I went to the bank where I had deposited it in order to collect it. It is the same bank where I had deposited part of my traveller’s cheques and opened an account. The director asked to see me and he said that he had not been able to cash the cheques because the bank that issued them has failed and they are now worthless. I left the coin there because I had to pay for the deposit box... but I don’t have a single franc left.”

Thérèse began to cry quietly, while Carlo took her hand gently.

“We will find a solution, Thérèse,” he said reassuringly.

“In any case,” continued the professor, in a tone if possible even deeper than usual, “this seems to me to be proof that the coin is beginning to cause trouble. Get rid of it, as soon as possible, find a way.”

“But how can I transmit to someone else a similar plague? It would be like... well, like deliberately infecting another person!”

“There are...” as he spoke, the professor turned on Carlo a profound and disquieting gaze, “there are people who for curious reasons are immune to what we could call a contagion.”

“Why are you looking at me like that?” asked Carlo uncomfortably.

“Because you, for reasons that I ignore, are one of those persons: I can feel it. Take charge of the coin, nothing will happen to you, and bring it to me so that I can examine it. I will be near your hometown at the end of January, we could meet there.”

“Not far from Locarno? Where?”

“In Ascona, I have been invited to hold a conference there on January 30<sup>th</sup> at the new hotel they have opened on Monte Verità.”

“What the one owned by the *balabiòtt*?” retorted Carlo, surprised and amused.

“Yes, precisely that one,” said the professor wagging his eyebrows, “...but nowadays the nudists are no longer in residence. It’s a pity!”

### *Paris – December 16<sup>th</sup> 1929*

Having finished their meeting, Carlo accompanied Thérèse home; she was very upset. As they walked side by side, Carlo had offered his arm, but she had refused it. Then she had begun speaking of the events she had just told Professor Bertrams about and his probable immunity to the contagion.

“Why should you have this prerogative?” asked Thérèse.

“It is as if he had read my mind,” said Carlo, “because just at that moment I was thinking of something my father had said.”

He told her about the coin found in the book, which not only had been in his family’s possession for years, but even for centuries with his ancestors.

“My father is convinced, and I am beginning to believe, that the person who minted the coin was a distant relative of ours. According to my father, that is the reason that possessing the coin does not do us any harm. Why this should be so, however, I do not know.”

“What should I do now?” asked Thérèse, “should I sell the coin?”

They stopped. They had reached the junction between the Boulevard and rue Montmartre. Carlo turned to her.

“I have a proposal: just listen to what I have to say, and then tell me what you think.”

Thérèse nodded.

“For a year now, my father and I have been considering opening a branch here in Paris, since a significant number of the antiques we sell come from auctions held in the city. The journeys and my stays here, which at first were enjoyable, are becoming a burden. My father can no longer keep up with the work and when I go back to Locarno, I have to deal with many of the aspects of the business that he previously dealt with.”

They started walking again, while Thérèse listened carefully.

“You are an independent and capable person and you could manage our office here in Paris.”

He stopped, expecting a reaction, but she continued to listen, waiting for him to reach the heart of his proposal.

“That is what I was thinking until yesterday, but the events of today have suggested a different possibility.”

Thérèse looked at him worriedly.

“I will say it without any messing about: let’s form a company together. The value of your participation will be the coin, so that it will not become mine, but ours, of the company. Apparently, the coin only harms individuals.”

Thérèse, who perhaps feared a proposal that she would not have been capable of accepting, looked at him in relief and with a smile, said,

“It seems like an excellent proposal! Thank you! Thank you for your trust!”

Carlo would have liked to hug her, hold her close and kiss her passionately, but he limited himself to kissing her hand.

“Well, now that I can call you ‘partner’, let’s meet tomorrow morning at eleven in rue de Richelieu 12. The lawyer Monsieur Barret has his chambers there and he will draw up the company documents.

When they reached the house, Carlo had the chance to meet Madame Antonelli. In the short time they spent together, *madame* had carefully observed him

without showing it. As he left, Carlo remembered that Thérèse was in financial difficulties, but he did not want to hand her money directly, since it would seem impolite, so he asked Madame Antonelli if she could lend Thérèse the hundred francs needed to withdraw the coin.

Madame nodded with a feline smile of satisfaction.

### *December 17<sup>th</sup> 1929*

Jean-Luc Benoit was beginning to find life as a semi-prisoner irksome. He kept saying to himself that at least this way he would not risk being discovered and upsetting his plans, but living like a nocturnal animal for the last ten days without being able to get out for a breath of air until the sun went down was weighing heavily on him.

The sight of Thérèse, who had looked surprisingly beautiful and feminine, had taken him back ten years, at least as far as his sentiments were concerned: the years of prison had hardened him and made him cynical, above all with regard to women. Behind bars, women were roughly simplified and transformed into two breasts and a tuft of pubic hair. The sight of his wife had been like taking a cloth to a blackboard, it had wiped out everything, *tabula rasa*, as if a spring had snapped and freed the true Jean-Luc who had remained a prisoner for eight years: as if he had returned to nineteen twenty.

However, to see her again, he had to wait, to wait patiently. Would he manage it?

### *Paris – December 17<sup>th</sup> 1929*

Thérèse had left the bank, Carlo had offered to accompany her but she had said she would go alone; the offices of the lawyer Barret in Rue de Richelieu were not far from the bank in Boulevard des Italiens.

Still, she did not feel comfortable, both because she was carrying an object of considerable value in her bag, and because it represented her passport to a new life, or because the disquieting words of Professor Bertrams were still ringing in



her ears. She decided to take a short cut along a side road, busy at that time of day with clerks from the various banks in the area.

She almost did not realise what was happening when a man passed her, tearing her bag from her arm and fleeing down the street. Before she could open her mouth to shout *thief!* two boys who had seen what had happened ran after the thief. As he ran, he knocked down a passer-by, hindering the pursuers, then there was a squealing of tyres and a loud thump.

In the meantime, the gendarmes had come running, while two young women, probably dressmakers at a nearby *atelier* had come out to help Thérèse, who was pale and shaking with fright.

Once again, Thérèse was certain she had recognised her husband in the attacker: she shook herself and began walking towards the group of people gathered at the junction with rue de Richelieu. A gendarme followed, asking if she was all right, but she did not listen to him.

Assisted by the gendarme, she pushed her way through the crowd: the thief had been knocked down by a lorry and now he was lying on the ground, immobile, in a tangle of limbs, his face pressed to the ground. Thérèse almost fainted, she was certain it was Jean-Luc; the gendarme supported her to stop her collapsing. At that moment, two other gendarmes approached and bent over the body. One of them stood up shaking his head, while the other turned the body over to examine the pockets in search of identity documents.

Thérèse looked down and saw that it was not her husband. She was relieved and sorry for the poor man who had, for a short time, been in possession of the coin that seemed to have brought terrible evil.

After asking for her identity documents and address, the gendarmes wrote their report and returned the handbag to Thérèse and one of them, Brigadier Fontanes, accompanied her to the offices of the lawyer Barret.

The secretary hurried to call the lawyer, who knew the brigadier.

“Good morning Brigadier, to what do I owe this...”

In the meantime, Carlo had come into the room and seeing Thérèse, he went

towards her asking what had happened.

“Carlo, is this Madame Milaud?” asked the lawyer. “What happened to her?” he asked the brigadier.

The gendarme gave the lawyer a brief account of the theft and asked if he could represent the lady, if became necessary for her to testify.

Thérèse was sitting beside Carlo, who was holding both her hands and listening to her story.

### *Atlantic Ocean – December 17<sup>th</sup> 1929*

Jean-Luc Benoit had opened the porthole; his only access to the world since he had boarded as an ‘invisible passenger’ as the captain called him, on the merchant ship that had left Le Havre two weeks earlier.

The captain, a friend of Armel’s, had told him that he should keep out of sight. No one, except for the captain was to know that he was on board, and this would allow him to disembark illegally in the United States.

Sailors, as everyone knows, go drinking when they reach a port and this loosens their tongues, they might reveal the presence of Jean-Luc. Better not to risk it and make sure that they were not aware of his presence.

Someone knocked on the door of the cabin, it was the code they had agreed, still, just to make sure he pulled back the bolt and hid behind the door.

“It’s all right,” said the Captain, “it’s me. Tomorrow we will dock, now I will tell you what to do: do precisely what I say, no improvising. Ever! You would be in trouble, but so would we with our cargo. Beware! I have covered for you and protected you because your friend Armel spoke for you, but if you fuck up; I will kill you with my bare hands.”

Jean-Luc nodded, he knew that the Captain meant what he said. He watched the docking manoeuvres through the porthole. The port was vast and the city that lay behind it seemed endless. He was afraid but he shook himself and prepared his baggage. He found a package wrapped in newspaper containing his shackles. He

thought briefly that he had been stupid to bring a souvenir of this kind with him. He unwrapped the package and looked at the iron cuffs that had encircled his ankles. He was about to throw them out of the porthole when he noticed that the name and number of the *owner*:

**025632 - TENOY**

He could not believe his eyes; they had exchanged his shackles with those of that bastard son of a whore Tenoy: a description that was a compliment! Tenoy was guilty of nine rapes, followed by nine murders, not to mention the way in which those poor women had been killed. He spat in disgust on the shackles and threw them into the sea. He was about to throw the newspaper after them when he noticed that the headlines mentioned the accident in the port of Nantes. Curious, he began to read.

**... the locomotive crashed into a military truck transporting eight prisoners destined for hard labour in the Cayenne islands. Six of them were slightly injured, one was killed and the eighth managed to escape. A nationwide manhunt is underway.**

**The prisoner who escaped is a very dangerous criminal, Luc Tenoy, guilty of atrocious crimes. The prisoner who died was called Jean-Luc Benoit.**

He stared in amazement at the newspaper for at least ten minutes, then a shudder ran through the ship as it bumped against the pier and he woke from his daze.

“Armel, you devil!” he thought, “that is why he called me ‘ghost’. He sorted out the newspaper. But if Jean-Luc Benoit is dead, then who am I?” He smiled and shrugged.

“Who cares who I am? The United States are enormous. One Jean-Luc Benoit more or less. What does it matter to anyone?”

He threw the newspaper out of the porthole, he had turned his back on the past, he was a free man, all he had to do was start again and he knew where.

He took the scrap of paper the boy at the port had scribbled and re-read it.

*Thérèse Milaud*

*C/o Nick Van Buren*

*530, Park Avenue*

*New York*

That was where his new life would start out.

The feeling of freedom even overcame the wave of nostalgia for his ex-wife.

“Oh widow of mine, wait for me, I am on my way!” he thought with a cynical grin.

### *Paris – December 20<sup>th</sup> 1929*

The documents founding the company had been signed and Carlo had accompanied Thérèse to visit half a dozen offices for rent in order to choose the most practical for their work and, above all, the most convenient for Thérèse who would be working there.

Carlo had also proposed to choose one with a section designed for accommodation, but Thérèse preferred to remain with Madame Antonelli, where she was happy and had created a relationship that was almost mother-daughter.

When her parents, a strict Jewish family from Roubaix, had found out that she intended to marry a *goyim*, a gentile, they had thrown her out of their home. They had not even contacted her when her husband was sent to prison and she was left on her own.

One day, sooner or later, she thought, she would ask about them. Perhaps one day Rivka, that was the name they had given her, while she had chosen Thérèse, would go home. Who knew? But then, why would she?

When she returned to the house in rue du Sentier, Madame Antonelli asked if everything was all right and she nodded. They had chosen an office in rue de Richer, near Drouot, it was already furnished and – a great novelty – it had a telephone!

She said that they had seen another larger office, that would have allowed her to move in, but she had chosen this one because she preferred to stay *chez madame*. The old lady hugged her and kissed her forehead.

“Carlo, *pardon*, Monsieur Fantone,” *madame* looked at her with a mischievous smile, “has asked me to spend Christmas in Locarno, so that I can meet his

father, who is also his business partner. I told him that I preferred to stay in Paris, my family is Jewish and anyway, I don't want to leave you alone during the festivities."

Madame scowled and said to her reprovingly, "Now you just go downstairs, go to Monsieur Janvier who owes me a lot of favours, you phone the Hôtel Millennium and ask for Monsieur Carlo Fantone. Tell him to come and see me immediately... as soon as possible."

"What if he is not there...?"

"Leave a message. Go, run."

Carlo read the message and at six o'clock that evening he was standing at the door of Madame Antonelli's residence, he rang the bell and heard the voice of the old lady asking, "Who is it?"

He answered and the door opened.

"*Bonsoir*, Madame Antonelli, I came because Thérèse, *pardon*, Mrs Milaud, (Madame gave another mischievous smile) asked me to call, has something happened?"

"I summoned you, please come in and sit down. I have asked Thérèse to stay in her room, because I wanted to speak to you alone."

Carlo looked at her, tilting his head interrogatively

"Thérèse told me that you invited her to Locarno for Christmas, but that she declined."

"Yes, she told me that..."

"Let me finish," said Madame, in a firm voice but smiling.

"Did you know that Thérèse's family are Jewish?"

"No. I didn't know, but what does that matter?"

"It matters, it matters. Certainly it matters!"

Carlo shook his head staring at her and made the typical Italian gesture with his fingers, to say 'well?'

"It is important because my family was also Jewish, although they were not strictly observant. I have never celebrated Christmas; it was not part of our

traditions. Therefore, I have no reason to be sad if I spend the week alone, absolutely none. Please, do me a favour. Ask your father to book a room at the best hotel in Locarno for Mrs Milaud, *pardon*, for Thérèse.” She gave her mischievous little smile.

“And... Merry Christmas!”

*New York – December 20<sup>th</sup> 1929*

Jean-Luc Benoit arrived at number 530 Park Avenue. Fortunately, the clothes Arnel had found for him before he embarked gave him a respectable air, so that when he spoke to the concierge of the building, who looked to Jean-Luc like a general in dress uniform, he was taken for one of Mr van Buren’s many guests. The concierge did not speak French and Jean-Luc did not understand a word of what the man said. It sounded like *msorisoer batmiservenbiuen isded plisasc misertrepr isneibor* (I am sorry, sir, but Mr van Buren is dead. Ask Mr Trapper his neighbour for information).

Jean-Luc shook his head, saying, “I don’t know what the hell you are talking about!”

He said it, however, almost gracefully, so that the doorman thought he was asking in French which floor he should go to. He took a piece of paper and wrote the name Trapper, then he accompanied him to the lift and rode with him to the fourth floor.

They emerged on a vast landing lined with pinkish marble, with two doors facing each other. One had a large brass plaque with the name van Buren. Two strips of paper with seals were glued across the locks, so that it was impossible to enter without tearing them.

The facing door had a smaller plaque saying ‘TRAPPER’.

Jean-Luc rang the bell and the door was opened by a young man of about twenty years old, who Jean-Luc considered rather effeminate. He simply muttered a few words in French, including his wife’s name, and showed him the scrap of paper

the boy had written.

The young man was surprised to read the name and he exclaimed, “Ah! Terry!” waving his hands to indicate that Jean-Luc should wait and called in a shrill voice,

“Joe, come here, there is a friend of Terry’s! A French guy!”

Joe, an elegant man of about forty arrived and greeted Jean-Luc in French.

“Good morning, sir, please forgive my young friend, he does not speak our language.”

“Are you French, Monsieur... Trapper?”

“I used to be. I changed my name ‘George Trappeur’, too difficult for Americans to pronounce to Joe Trapper and I became an American citizen. What can I do for you Mr...?”

“Benoit, Jean-Luc Benoit.”

“Ah.” Said Trapper.

“Have you heard my name before? From Thérèse, perhaps?”

“Well yes, I’m afraid so, but not in a particularly flattering way. However, since you are now a free citizen, I don’t see why I can’t offer you a beer. Come in Jean-Luc.”

Joe told Jean-Luc that Thérèse had left for Europe at the end of October on Nick van Buren’s business.

Nick’s financial affairs were dire, in that period the American stock exchange had lost millions of dollars and Nick, after losing vast amounts of money, had sent Terry to France to sell a very precious item and try to recover some of it.

Only a few days later, after yet another senseless speculation, Nick had lost everything and in despair, he had thrown himself of the Queensboro bridge, the one that linked Manhattan with Long Island.

The authorities had seized his apartment. Joe Trapper did not know if Nick had any relatives.

“You know them well; can I ask you whether Thérèse was Nick’s mistress?”

“Ha ha ha!” Trapper began to laugh. “Forgive me, Jean-Luc, I couldn’t help it.

No, she was not. Certainly not.”

“How can you be so sure?” asked Jean-Luc.

“You see, Nick and I were friends, we certainly didn’t do business together, and that is why I am still... shall we say... well off. We had only one thing in common, we went to the same exclusive clubs, and I can assure you that there are no wo-men in those places.” He affectionately took the hand of the young man who was watching them languidly.

“Do you understand me?”

“I think so,” answered Jean-Luc without turning a hair.

“Would you like another beer?”

Jean-Luc nodded and Joe gave a quick wave of the hand, which was sufficient to send the dreamy young man in search of two cold beers.

“What are you going to do here in America?” asked Joe.

“I don’t know, yet. I hoped that Thérèse would be able to help me, I certainly did not want to convince her to come back to me. Now I don’t know what to do.”

“Have you got any money with you?” asked Joe.

Jean-Luc showed him.

“You won’t go far with these francs. If you try to change them, they will certainly cheat you. I’ll change them for you at a fair rate.”

He got up, took some banknotes from a drawer, and gave them to Jean-Luc.

“They are low denomination. You can buy a ticket to... No, wait.”

He turned to the young man, Eddie and told him that when they had finished their beers he should accompany Jean-Luc to Central Station and buy a train ticket for him.

He got up and went over to his desk, where he took a sheet of deckle-edged paper with his initials in the watermark and unscrewed his gold-plated Waterman fountain pen.

He wrote a brief letter that he folded and placed in an envelope made from the same paper. Then, on a piece of notepaper, he wrote the name of a city and a state.



“Eddie will take you to the central station and buy a ticket for you. I am sending you far away, but I think that is the best solution for someone who has to make a new life for themselves. Once you arrive, go to the person whose name is on the envelope. He is a friend of mine and he will find you work.”

“How can I? I don’t have much money, almost nothing.”

“Don’t worry; I will take care of that.”

“Thank you, but I will never be able...”

“To pay me back? Well, we will see about that, there is time. This country offers plenty of opportunities and a lot of surprises for those like us.”

“Like... us?” asked Jean-Luc worriedly.

“Oh don’t worry, I didn’t mean what you are thinking, silly boy!” said Trapper laughing.

“I meant this.” He rolled up the sleeve of his shirt to reveal a tattoo that was very common in the French prisons: Jean-Luc had a similar one.

### *Locarno – January 1930*

Thérèse had left at the start of the month, after spending the holidays in Locarno. It had been an opportunity to meet Siro, but also to understand their business, so that she could set up the office in rue de Richer more efficiently. There was a lot of work to do in Paris, during his long absence between November and December Carlo had purchased a considerable number of objects at auction, both furniture and paintings, and now came the complicated and boring part of the shipping to Locarno, with all the problems and bother that the customs procedures involved.

Fortunately, the presence of a telephone line in both offices (Carlo had had one installed in Locarno, too) made it easier to clarify all the doubts that Thérèse might have at the start of the activity.

Siro had always been sceptical regarding such technical innovations.

“How can anyone seriously talk down a metal tube?” he said shaking his head

despairingly every time that infernal device trilled.

However, it must be said that, when the first goods arrived punctually at their destination, thanks to the shipments organised by Thérèse using the telephone, Siro gave a low gurgle of approval. He would never have bet even twenty *rappen* on the possibility that it would work, although clearly, he had never mentioned his doubts to Carlo.

Thérèse's presence in Locarno during the festivities had improved Siro's mood, because he had spent the time brushing off his French, which was becoming a little rusty from lack of practice. Now that the beautiful lady had left, he was still curious about the relationship between her and his son.

Occasionally he made mild remarks hoping to gather some information. At other times, he blatantly said things like... "well...?" meaning, "haven't you made a move, yet?"

At this point Carlo lost his temper and said that it was none of his business.

No, no, this is also my business, dear boy. What do you intend to do? Sit here and go to rot? I want grandchildren," insisted Siro.

One day, while Carlo was walking into the office with the post, Siro brusquely asked, "How old is she?"

"Who?"

"Thérèse, of course."

"My goodness! Again! She is twenty-nine; it was on the company documents."

Siro thought about it for a few minutes, and then he said, "Well, she is not awfully young, still..."

"Still what?" huffed Carlo.

"Still, just think that Ninin, you know, your friend Eugenio's sister, married at thirty-nine and now she has four children. After all, there is still hope for you."

The discussion was interrupted by Carlo, who had opened one of the envelopes in his hand, striking his forehead and saying,

"Dammit! I had completely forgotten!"

*Locarno – January 27<sup>th</sup> 1930*

*Mr Carlo Fantone*

*Locarno*

*Switzerland*

*Barcelona, January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1930*

*My dearest friend,*

*I hope that all is going well and that you and Madame Milaud are enjoying excellent health.*

*When we met in Paris last December, I told you that I would be holding a conference in Ascona at the end of January, in the new hotel that Baron von der Heydt, a very dear friend, has recently had built on Monte Verità.*

*The conference has been confirmed and will take place on January 30<sup>th</sup>.*

*I hope that in the meantime Madame Milaud has agreed to the solution I suggested to her and that she has thus freed herself of that painful burden.*

*I beg you to confirm that you will be present, by this I mean yourself and the lady, but also and above all that you will bring the sadly notorious coin, which I trust is still in your possession.*

*Your presence will be precious to me, but the presence of the coin will be essential for an experiment that will be carried out at the end of the conference.*

*I look forward to seeing you soon.*

*With my very best regards,*

*Alejandro Bertrams*

*Ascona – January 30<sup>th</sup> 1930*

*In order to be in Ascona in time, with the coin, which was held in a safety deposit box in Paris, Thérèse organised an urgent trip to Locarno, suspending some of the shipments, which in any case were not needed until the beginning of the following month.*

*The hotel on Monte Verità was brand new and had been built to the most avant-*

garde German standards. Baron van der Heydt had asked a renowned German architect to draw up the plans, but the result, with all its squared lines and the use of unadorned reinforced concrete, seemed to the majority of the visitors unpleasant and disquieting. Only Thérèse, perhaps because she was accustomed to the American style of building, had not expressed such negative opinions.

The conference room, which immediately gave the participants a chilly reception, had excellent acoustics, which made it very easy to understand Professor Bertrams' low, intense voice.

The professor gave a brief lecture on physiognomics, the science that declared that it was possible to deduce the psychological and moral characteristics of a person from their physical appearance. He began with the studies of Aristotle in *Prior Analytics*, moved on to the third century with *de Physiognomonica* by Polemon of Laodicea and the sixteenth-century *De Scultura* of Pomponio Gaurico. Then he continued, mentioning works from the early eighteenth century, by the Swiss Protestant pastor Johann Kaspar Lavater, and finally including the recent theories of Professor Cesare Lombroso.

This exhaustive panorama, which had risked plunging the audience into a catatonic torpor, was in fact aimed at introducing the latest and widely contested work by Professor Lombroso, *Ricerche sui fenomeni ipnotici e spiritici*, from which Professor Bertrams drew the conclusion that the extrasensory capabilities of a subject, that is their capacity to perceive a reality that is not generally 'perceptible', may be revealed in the appearance of the person themselves.

Briefly, a person with such a predisposition would be easily recognisable, obviously, for one who knew what to observe.

He even considered that some objects, precisely thanks to their shape, could behave as a medium, as receivers of voices, of signs and of all those forms of communication that are normally considered 'inexplicable'.

The second part of the conference, which the professor called 'an experiment', was usually held with a small number of participants in a small, darkened room.

The essence of the experiment was, for the professor, not so much the calling up

of a spirit, a practice he abhorred but which he considered necessary, but rather to discover whether there were common features amongst the persons who acted as an intermediary: as a 'medium'.

This time, and for a very precise reason, the demonstration was exceptionally held in the open, in a small amphitheatre in the park and in the presence of a large number of people.

These were the ideal conditions for the experiment to fail, because according to the professor, having too many people present dispersed the energy. However, his objective this time was not a person, but an object: the coin.

All the forty people who had listened to the conference now, after taking some refreshments, put on their coats and cloaks and went into the grounds of the hotel. It was still mid-winter, but the days were growing longer and on that sunny afternoon the temperature was almost pleasant, the primulas had even flowered in the more sheltered corners of the park. There were, it is true, a few dark clouds to the north, in the direction of the mountains and a few more hovered over the lake, but otherwise the afternoon was enchanting.

The professor asked the participants to sit on the benches in the semicircle and to form a chain by holding the hands of their neighbours, or in the case of the last in the row, also of the person sitting behind them. Then, he joined the chain, holding the notorious coin in his other hand. He pronounced a few phrases in what, to Carlo who was sitting near him, sounded like Latin.

Nothing happened. He repeated the ceremony a couple of times, then he changed places with Carlo, handing him the coin, and so on with five other people, without any result.

Murmurs of disapproval began to be heard and the professor, who was expecting precisely this, took advantage and began to speak. He explained that this was precisely the result he had expected: it was an experiment and it had been successful, precisely because there had been no result.

Then he began the second part, there was immediately a buzz of protest, which was immediately silenced by a furious glance from Bertrams.

“I beg you, ladies and gentlemen, to continue holding hands and to be silent for a couple of minutes until the experiment is over. Thank you.”

He stood before the participants in the centre of the amphitheatre, checking that everyone was doing as he said, then he took the coin, set it on a sort of half column that acted as a ledger and began to recite the usual formula. There was a bluish flash immediately followed by a flash of lightening that fell just above the hotel with a thundering noise that shook all the participants. In the silence that followed, they heard the voice of a woman, a young woman with a sensual voice. Everyone turned in the direction of the voice, which was coming from the mouth of an astonished man with a magnificent handlebar moustache, who apart from being portly and extremely grave, everyone remembered as having a particularly low and hoarse voice.

“What is your name, dear lady?” asked the professor.

“Marie Duplessis, sir. Why, what are you doing with my coin? Give it to me immediately, come, I must take it to the goldsmith Chaumet to have it made into a pendant,” answered the man, his eyes wide.

“Forgive me, dear lady, but I no longer recall where the goldsmith Chaumet has his workshop,” asked the professor.

“You are so forgetful, all of Paris knows that...” she gave a little cough, “forgive me, ever since I was given that coin I have had this silly...” a further fit of coughing followed, “... I have been afflicted by this cough.”

“Chaumet, you were saying....?”

“Ah, yes, he is in place... Ven...dô...me...” she replied, beginning to cough repeatedly and in an ever deeper tone until the moustached gentleman, shaking himself, said in a hoarse voice,

“What happened? I am so sorry, I must have fallen asleep, I hope I did not disturb the experiment!”

All the participants stared at him amazed and horrified.

The professor, who had not been particularly influenced, asked him.

“Please forgive me, you are Mr...?”

“Doktor Bertmann.”

“Also gut, Herr Doktor Bertmann, could you kindly tell the people who took part in the experiment with you your profession?”

“Certainly, although I don’t see how it concerns you, in any case, I am the director of a chemical plant in Zurich.”

“Thank you. Oh,... one more question, if you don’t mind, then I will tell you what happened. Do you remember the name of the *Dame aux Camélias*?”

“The *dame* of what? How dare you, are you making fun of me?”

“No, certainly not. Now I will tell you what happened.”

*Ascona – January 30<sup>th</sup> 1930*

“He is a charlatan, I always said so!”

“No father, you tell him Thérèse...”

“No, I don’t believe it! Those people could make the walls speak. Perhaps he is a ventriloquist; perhaps he and the fat chap were in cahoots: what do you know?”

“But, Monsieur Siro...”

“No Thérèse, don’t call me Monsieur Siro in that tone of voice... I beg you! You could make me believe anything you want,” interrupted Siro laughing.

“Anyway, when that man makes me hear things that only I know, perhaps then I will believe him! Listen to me; everyone knows that the lady of the camellias really existed and that her name was Marie Duplessis. Then, as far as the fact that she died of a cough, that is of tuberculosis... well that is common knowledge!”

“In any case, it was astonishing,” said Carlo calmly.

“Another thing,” said Siro. I was present at the inauguration of the Chaumet workshops in place Vendôme: it was nineteen o three or four... if I remember correctly.”

“Well, what about it?” asked Carlo.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just that Marie Duplessis had been dead for about fifty years

by that time,” answered Siro placidly.

“Ah!” said Carlo.

*Ascona – January 31<sup>st</sup> 1930*

“You made fun of us all! What idiots we were!”

Carlo was furious with the professor, who on the other hand was sitting in an armchair in the garden of the Hôtel Verità, watching him with an amused expression.

“My experiment was a success!”

“A success! Nonsense!” retorted Carlo, “you were accomplices!”

“I admit that,” said the professor, but that was not the experiment. The experiment was the first one and I told you all so. The people want excitement: they all went away happy and satisfied.

They listened to my conference, they paid for that and then they took part in a free performance, I repeat ‘free’, for which I did not charge even one franc, but which quite satisfied them.

“Hmm,” said Carlo.

“The experiment, or rather the experiments were absolutely satisfactory, believe me. I repeat, satisfactory.”

“What experiment are you talking about?” asked Carlo.

“Steady on, don’t get upset,” said Thérèse.

“It is necessary to look beyond things to understand,” continued the professor.

“The first experiment was successful because I tested two facts. First: the presence of too many people disperses the energy; secondly, objects alone have no power.

The second experiment was more banal: I showed that people will believe anything, it is sufficient to present it well. They all fall for it, even the most intelligent people... like you, for example.”

Carlo continued to huff, but now he was listening carefully.



“What is more, I had an incredible stroke of luck with that flash of lightening: for a moment I almost believed it myself,” concluded the professor laughing.

Then he fell silent and suddenly became serious.

“I said that objects alone have no power, and that is true. But objects combined with people can be very powerful.”

No, no, please, do not look at me like that. It is not a new trick. Your father is right; only believe when you are told things that only you know to be true. This could be one of them.

Yesterday, when I was given the coin, I had a vision. It lasted only a moment, I saw a house burning with two people inside it; they were dead. One of them was the maker of the coin. I believe that he was a distant relative of yours.”

“But... but... how...?”

“Is this true? Is it true?” asked Thérèse agitatedly.

“I don’t know why this happened to me, but that is precisely what I saw,” the professor lowered his head and spoke in a very low voice, shaking his head.

“For years. For years, every night, I have dreamed of that burning house. It is a dream that terrifies me and I have always wondered what it meant. Yesterday, I discovered what it represented and I understood why I was magnetically attracted to that coin. Now I must understand. I must understand, why me? I must understand what I have to do with all this.”

“We could... perhaps... we could insist... that is, keep trying,” suggested Thérèse.

“No, no, it is better not. I must think. I will contact you when I am ready. You will help me again, won’t you?”

Carlo grasped Thérèse’ hand, nodding.

“Of course. Of course, without a doubt.”

### *Paris – April 1930*

After the exciting days spent in Ascona at the end of January, life returned to

normal and Thérèse was back in Paris, where every two or three weeks Carlo joined her at the office in rue de Richer; either to check that the new company was running properly, or to purchase new items at the auctions, but also simply to see her again.

Not that anything special had happened in their relationship, which although it had lost the rigid formality of the early days and given way to more friendly attitudes, had not yet taken the turn that Carlo's father was hoping for.

Thérèse was still living with Madame Antonelli, with whom she had an almost familial relationship. Carlo now used Hôtel Bristol, instead of the more expensive Millennium, keeping the same room available each time he stayed in the city.

He often invited Thérèse to dinner in the hope that she would offer him a chance to start a more intimate and personal conversation, but she was simply cordial and friendly, maintaining the minimal distance that prevented him from going further.

On the evening of April twenty-fourth, a Thursday, Carlo invited Thérèse to a dinner at a restaurant in Montparnasse. A quiet place, very different from the glitter and lights of the better-known *cafés*.

They were talking about work matters, the coming auctions and what it would be advisable to purchase when suddenly Carlo came out with a question that was almost surreal in that context.

“Thérèse, would you marry me?”

She looked up in amazement; she had not been expecting this. She gave a small smile, put her head on one side, took Carlo's hand and answered, “I can't my dear. I have not divorced and Jean-Luc, my husband, has never accepted the fact that I disappeared. When he comes out of prison in two years' time, he will come looking for me and I am afraid that he will find me. Jean-Luc is a violent man, he is dangerous.”

“We could move to Locarno, we can employ a person in Paris, he will never find you.”

“You don’t know him. I don’t want to ruin your life.”

Carlo tried to reason with her, but he realised that it was useless. He would have to find another solution. He took her home and they agreed to meet the next day at the office.

Carlo could not stop thinking about the matter; he had to act. He looked at his watch, nine o’clock, much too late; still, with the job his friend did, it was worth trying. The phone rang for a long time.

“*Le Figaro*, editorial offices, who is calling?”

“Could I speak to Michel Guardià, please?”

He heard a shout as the voice called “Michel, someone wants you.”

He could hear the click of Michel’s steps as he crossed the office through the receiver.

“Who is it?” he asked brusquely.

“Hi Michel, this is Carlo Fantone.”

“Why, no! You old lady-killer, what are you doing in Paris? I haven’t heard from you for ages.”

“Listen, I need to speak to you about an urgent matter, come down and we’ll have a beer. I’m in the *bistrot* in front of your offices.

All right, but give me a few minutes, I have to finish a piece. You are at *Chez Louise*, right? I’ll see you there around ten.”

“I’ll be waiting for you,” said Carlo.

Michel arrived at a quarter to ten, with his usual rumpled look of someone pulled through a hedge backwards.

“So, after three years you just pop up like that! What happened to you?”

They gave each other a firm shake of the hand and then a bear hug peppered with words in a mixture of Lombard, Calabrian and Occitan dialect.

Carlo had met Michele, who later became Michel, in Milano when they were studying law. Then Michele, bored with his studies, had emigrated to France and begun writing for *Le Figaro* on Italian politics. A long journey for one who had left a small town in Calabria, Guardia Piemontese: a strange place on the slopes

of the Sila mountain plateau, where some people still spoke a language taken there in the twelfth century by the Waldensians who had fled there to escape religious persecution.

“So, what are you doing in Paris?” asked Michele.

Carlo told him the story of recent months and after the third beer, he asked the question he had been mulling over ever since he had left Thérèse.

“It’s not really your area of expertise, but you have an excellent memory. Do you remember that a few months ago there was an accident in Rennes between a prison van and a train?”

“Of course,” answered Michele, “but it wasn’t Rennes, it was Nantes.”

“Ah, yes, of course! Well, do you remember that one of the prisoners got away? Do you remember his name? Was it perhaps Jean-Luc Benoit?”

Michele thought about it for a moment then he said with certainty.

“No. His name was Tenoy, Luc Tenoy. They looked everywhere for him, but they never found him.”

“Good!” said Carlo comforted. The idea that there was a dangerous prisoner running around, who could do Thérèse harm had been tormenting him.

“Still, that name...” said Michele suddenly, “Benoit, that sounds familiar. Let’s go to the newspaper.”

They paid for their beers and left for the newspaper offices. They went up to the first floor where the back numbers were held and began looking through them.

“Was he a friend of yours?”

“Who, Benoit? Not at all, I’ll tell you the whole story afterwards,” said Carlo.

“Here it is! I’ve found it, read this.”

**... the locomotive crashed into a military truck transporting eight prisoners destined for hard labour in the Cayenne islands. Six of them were slightly injured, one was killed and the eighth managed to escape. A nationwide manhunt is underway.**

**The prisoner who escaped is a very dangerous criminal, Luc Tenoy, guilty of atrocious crimes. The prisoner who died was called Jean-Luc Benoit.**

Carlo stared at the article in amazement, while Michele watched him curiously.

“Well...” Michele added a jumble of curious exclamations with an interrogative

intonation, "... are you going to tell me what all this is about?"

Carlo told him about Thérèse and her husband and of her fears and added that he wanted to be quite sure it was the right Jean-Luc Benoit.

"Tomorrow I will go to Quai des Orfèvres, as a journalist I can ask for that kind of information, as you know. I'll ask for confirmation... but in my opinion, your Madame Thérèse is... he waved his hands "...is now a widow. If you want I'll be best man."

"Best man?" asked Carlo.

"At your wedding! Anyone can see that you have got it badly. Aren't I right?"

### *Paris – April 25<sup>th</sup> 1930*

It was half past eleven the next morning when Michele left Quai des Orfèvres, it had taken him some time, since he had entered at eight thirty, but in the end he had obtained the information he needed, plus a written declaration. He had it down in writing, with an official stamp and the clerk's signature.

Carlo was waiting outside, he had been there for two hours and he had smoked half a packet of *Gitanes*.

Michele thrust the paper under his nose; Carlo read it and heaved a sigh of relief. It showed that the prisoner had been imprisoned in Lille and that he was certainly Jean-Luc Benoit.

The words of the expert at Drouot, Mr Janowski, crossed his mind. He had said that the coin was a sort of amulet in reverse. In effect, since Thérèse had got rid of it, things had taken a turn for the better. He hugged Michele and told him, "If it's a boy we'll call him after you."

Michele returned to his office, laughing and shaking his head.

Carlo turned towards rue de Richer. When he entered, Thérèse was surprised to see him because there were two important auctions and she had not expected him to come in until the following day.

Now that he was there, Carlo realised that he had no idea how to bring the topic

up. He certainly couldn't say, "...oh, by the way... have you heard? You are a widow!" nor could he simply hand her the certificate so that she could read the information.

So, he began by telling her that he had met Michele, a friend from his university days by chance and that they had drunk a few beers, for old times' sake. After five minutes of empty chatter, Thérèse stopped him and asked what had happened.

"Here," He said, hand her the paper. "This concerns your husband. You know, yesterday evening you told me you were worried and so..."

"Well?"

"...so I asked Michele, who is a journalist..."

"Sorry, but what has your friend the journalist got to do with that delinquent husband of mine?"

"Yesterday evening was the first time you told me your husband's name. I thought it was familiar, so I asked Michele to check the back numbers of the newspaper, because I thought he had escaped from prison. I remembered reading about it."

Thérèse paled and put a hand to her mouth.

Carlo shook his head.

"I was wrong. It was another prisoner who got away, a man called Luc Tenoy; a very similar name. A prison van was involved in an accident and he managed to escape."

"Why are you telling me this?" asked Thérèse anxiously.

"Because during the accident another prisoner was killed and his name was the same as that of your husband."

Thérèse stared at him open-mouthed, without speaking. Carlo handed her the piece of paper from the police and asked her, "Is it him?"

Thérèse glanced at the document, stumbled backwards and into a chair, then resting her elbows on the desk she began to cry.

Carlo went over to console her, he put his hands on her shoulders but she

suddenly stood up, turned to him, grabbed his arms and kissed him with a passion that she had been holding back for too long.

### *Paris – May 1930*

Thérèse had confided the latest developments to Madame Antonelli, who had nodded happily and smiled, as if to say ‘I told you so’.

Madame was very pleased with the way things had turned out, but she had also taken on the role of substitute mother and she had become, if possible, even more severe with regard to Carlo’s visits to Thérèse, which were allowed only in her presence.

The moments of intimacy the couple shared were very chaste, also because the space available in the office was limited and anything more would have required the athletic qualities of two well-trained gymnasts.

At the end of the month, Carlo received a telegram from Professor Bertrams, asking him to meet in Milano, where the professor was holding a conference the following week.

Thérèse preferred not to go since the city would inevitably remind Carlo of sad times and she did not want their blossoming affair to be affected in any way.

Carlo found an unexpected travelling companion in his friend Eugenio, who had planned a business trip to the Lombard capital around that time. He was happy to have his company, because it would offer him the support and the opinion of a person he considered extremely practical and not at all gullible.

The professor was more spectral than ever. His excessively white skin contrasted with his black hair (Carlo was certain that it was the result of hair dye) and with the black of his garments.

The dream about the burning house and the people who died there tormented him every night. He was convinced that the answer lay in that ill-starred coin and he was equally certain that it was hexed.

He was in Milano not only for the conference, but also because he wanted, he

told them, to visit a small town called Masserano. Both Carlo and Eugenio started in their seats, because they knew that this was the town where the coin had been minted.

The professor told them how, after lengthy negotiations and after showing letters of presentation to the *Podestà* of Milano, he had been able, in the company of the sceptical and worried mayor, to wander from church to church to search through the registers of births and deaths for mention of persons who had died in a fire. Many registers were lost or illegible and in any case, they did not mention the reason for the death, only the date. He also searched the archives at the palace of the Ferrero princes, but there was no trace of fires, perhaps because these events were mentioned only when they involved a noble house, certainly not the houses of the common people. Altogether, he had found nothing and now he saw the coin as his only resource.

He asked, or rather, he begged, Carlo to sell it to him, but Carlo refused because it did not belong to him. In fact, it now belonged to the company he had formed with Thérèse, but even so, he considered it too dangerous an object to pass around.

Eugenio was very much impressed by the meeting with that strange personage, who on the one hand was a pitiful figure and on the other, quite terrifying.

Still, although he was in principle very sceptical about every irrational manifestation, on the train from Milano back to Locarno, he continued to repeat to Carlo what he had already confided on a previous occasion and that is, that reality was often more surprising than anyone could possibly imagine.

Before leaving them the professor, who was on the point of tears, managed to make Carlo promise that he would ask Thérèse for permission to use the coin one last time. This time it would be a séance to call up, through a well-known medium, the spirit that made the coin so evil. As soon as she had given her consent, he would organise the event on the French Riviera, in Nice, where he was planning a conference for the end of June.



*Nice – June 26<sup>th</sup> 1930*

Carlo was wearing a lightweight cream linen suit, two-tone shoes and a large panama hat, which his friend the tenor Lucas Cortes had given him some years ago.

Thérèse, following the latest fashions, was wearing a lightweight pyjama suit in a pale blue. It looked a bit like an Eastern dancer's trousers, and she was wearing a huge white canvas hat with a trailing blue ribbon.

They had arrived a couple of days before the date foreseen for Professor Bertrams' appearance and they were taking advantage of the opportunity to enjoy a short holiday, happy to be able to have some time to themselves, but above all... some space, since they had so little in Paris.

They were strolling along the Promenade des Anglais in the company, since the world is a small place, of some acquaintances of Carlo's from Locarno. To avoid gossip he had introduced Thérèse as Madame Fantone.

"Do you mind?" asked Carlo.

"Of course not, sooner or later I will have to get used to it," she answered with a smile.

As they were passing before the casino La Jetée, a large building on pillars that stood beside the sea like a sort of floating Kremlin, they decided to return to their room at the Hôtel Ruhl, which stood almost facing it and overlooked the Albert Ier gardens.

The professor had preferred the Hôtel Ruhl to the worldlier Negresco because, as he said, the Ruhl offered more privacy and elegance.

The conference was foreseen for the next afternoon and would be followed in the evening by a spiritual séance with about twenty carefully selected guests.

The professor had invited a young Italian friend of his to take part, who it appeared was particularly sensitive, although he refused to say his surname, which was that of a well-known family from Torino. He was introduced simply as Signor Aldolfo.

*Nice – June 27<sup>th</sup> 1930*

They spent the morning on the beach and Carlo, who had previously only encountered the sea when he oversaw the unloading of goods in the port of Genova, had equipped himself suitably and was now enjoying swimming in the waves.

He was pleased with the experience and he was admiring, with discreet sideways glances, the various bathing beauties. At the same time, he was annoyed that all those people were admiring Thérèse in her bathing suit.

It occurred to him that his friend Michele was right, “I really have got it badly!”

It was now six in the evening and the conference was drawing to a close. After the applause and the thanks from the professor, the auditorium slowly emptied as the audience moved contentedly towards the cocktails offered by the hotel management.

Bertrams looked tired and, if possible, even paler than before, despite the fact that he had arrived on his yacht. Worried, they approached to ask whether he felt strong enough for the séance. He insisted with a pained air that it was not a question of wanting to hold it, but of a duty.

The twenty guests invited, all curious and excited, had been sitting for some time on the chairs arranged around a small, round, three-legged table that stood in the centre of the hotel ballroom.

The ballroom had been closed and prepared in the morning and no one had been allowed in, until the professor personally opened the door, punctually at eight forty-five.

The door was closed again and locked from the inside by the professor’s own hand, then, he turned off the electric lights, leaving only six candlesticks with three candles each lit. It was sufficient to see what was happening.

Three persons were chosen by casting of lots amongst those present and invited to form a chain of five people with the professor and the young Signor Adolfo.

Carlo and Thérèse had decided beforehand that they would not take part in the

draw.

The professor carefully extracted from its case the gold coin portraying the Duke Vittorio Amedeo of Savoy and placed it reverently in the centre of the table.

Three hundred years of history, often with cruel and sad events, shone in the centre of the dark wooden table.

The professor got up and gave those present some last instructions: under all circumstances and whatever might happen, they were to remain silent and absolutely still until he personally declared the séance concluded.

He looked round the room, asking for the consent of all those present then took his place, asking them to complete the chain; that is to put their thumbs together and to reach out to touch the little finger of the person next to them.

Then silence fell.

A few minutes passed in an embarrassing silence then a voice was heard from the mouth of one of the spectators.

“What do you want from me, now?”

Silence.

“I am speaking to you, bloody baron. What do you want?”

“To know who you are, what is your name?” This time it was young Adolfo who spoke.

“I wasn’t speaking to you. It is he who must answer me.”

“Who are you spirit?” asked the professor in a small voice.

“Ohhh! About time, too. Have you lost your tongue? Has it been cut out? Once upon a time, you talked, too much, even!”

“But... but... but... who are you?”

“Are you getting old, don’t you recognise me? I am Alfonso Benassi. I see you still have one of my coins with you. They were really a fine piece of work!”

“Do you mean that the coins belonged to you?”

“No, you dotard! I mean that I *made* them! When I was at Masserano, do you recall? You ordered them from you, you swine. After that, you burnt down my house with me and my wife inside it,” the voice cracked for a moment. “May

God strike you down; you also took my son away!”

The voice fell silent.

In the total silence, the coin rose slowly from the table, seeming to remain suspended in the air for an interminable moment. Twenty pairs of eyes stared at it in amazement. Then it moved, very slowly, it stopped an inch above the flame of a candle.

“Do you want it?” thundered the voice, “take it, it is yours!”

As if it had been shot from a catapult, the coin struck the professor in the chest and without caring that it was scorching hot, he caught it before it could fall to the ground. He gave a shout of pain.

“Does it burn?” said the voice with a gloomy chuckle. “Do you feel it burn? Do you feel it? Do you feel...” the voice faded away into silence.

A few minutes passed before Adolfo broke the silence, asking the professor if he felt all right.

There was no answer, he turned to him and saw that the chair was empty. Someone turned on the electric light, the professor had disappeared.

Thérèse, on the other hand, as white as a sheet was still staring at Carlo, paralysed with fright.

First of all everyone now turned towards Carlo who, thinking that he had fallen asleep, asked, “What, what? Was I snoring?”

No one answered, only Thérèse, worried but gentle, asked him,

“Did you really not know what was happening?”

“Why, what happened?”

*Nice – June 27<sup>th</sup> 1930*

The next morning Carlo woke with a thundering headache. The noise of the surf coming through his bedroom window had woken him. He turned with a pained smile to see Thérèse who was just waking up and was asking him how he felt.

He sat on the edge of the bed beside Thérèse and took her hand, asking,

“Did that voice really come from *me*?”

“Yes, I swear it and it was not your voice, it was completely different. It spoke Italian, but with a strange inflection. I didn’t understand everything the voice said, but I understood that it was very angry with a certain baron: I thought that was the professor.”

“I knew nothing about it. What I know I heard from Signor Adolfo. He told me the whole story. What a strange young man.”

“At first I thought it was one of the professor’s tricks. I didn’t realise that you were speaking.”

“Who knows where he is now? I don’t think he set up all this business to run off with a coin, no matter how precious it is. What do you think?”

Carlo got up and went onto the balcony.

“Come out here, my dear, it looks like a beautiful day, there must have been a storm last night and it has blown away yesterday’s clouds.”

She joined him and put her arms around his waist, gazing at him she said,

“That’s enough! I don’t want to spend my nights making love to a ghost.”

“I promise,” he said kissing her.

“If he left on his yacht, he will almost be in Spain,” said Thérèse.

“Who knows? Anyway, what does it matter? Perhaps it is better like this. That coin really frightened me.”

Someone knocked on the door and Carlo, thinking that it was the waiter bringing their breakfast, said, “Come in.”

When the door opened, he was surprised to see the director of the hotel with an extraordinarily solemn air.

“Monsieur Fantone, Madame, I very much regret that I must give you terrible news. I am told that last night your friend Mr Bertrams insisted on leaving on his yacht, although the weather conditions were not favourable. Unfortunately, he hit a storm and, I am sorry to say... we are certain that the yacht sank. The coastguard has sent a motor boat out, but they have only found flotsam: he is registered as missing, but we fear that in fact...” he stopped, visibly upset, “...

there is no hope. He was a wonderful person. For all of us, it is a very sad morning: please accept condolences on behalf of myself and the hotel staff for the loss of your friend.”

He turned to leave the room, but then he stopped.

“Ah I almost forgot, Monsieur Fantone. Please forgive me, but my feelings are getting the better of me. A person from the marina came this morning with an envelope for you. He told the *concierge* that Monsieur Bertrams handed it to him just before he sailed.”

*Nice – January 27<sup>th</sup> 1930*

*Mr Carlo Fantone*

*Hôtel Ruhl*

*Nice*

*My dear friend,*

*The events that occurred this evening have clarified many things for me. ~~It is an old story and I hope that I can explain~~*

*I am very sorry that I had to flee taking with me ~~the coin~~, that evil object but I considered it a question of honour, mine and that of my dynasty, to taken on myself this burden.*

*It is a very old story that I hope I will be able to ~~tell you~~ explain, when we meet again.*

*~~In the hope of~~*

*To compensate you for the material loss and with the profound hope that I will not offend you, you will find a cheque, ~~please do with it as you wish~~*

*Do not be surprised by the signature: Bertrams is not a stage name, but my second surname.*

*Respectfully,*

*Baron Francisco Maria Ardiles y Bertrams*

*June 26<sup>th</sup> 1930*

*Locarno – June 30<sup>th</sup> 1930*

Siro had now read for the third time the agitated missive, packed with corrections and second thoughts and signed by the Baron Francisco Maria Ardiles y Bertrams that Carlo and Thérèse had brought from Nice.

His gaze had become, if that were possible, even more penetrating than usual. His eyes were narrowed to two thin slits fixed on Carlo above the gold rims of his spectacles.

“So, he was a relative?”

Then he turned to Thérèse, whom he had already observed with ill-concealed satisfaction and in a gallant tone he said,

“Please excuse me, Madame, if I speak only to my son, but this concerns matters of which only he and I are aware.”

“Father, she already knows, I told her the whole story. She nearly had a heart attack, poor thing, when I started speaking in that strange voice. Do you think I could keep it from her?”

Siro opened the drawer of his desk and took out a small volume that he handled with great care, almost devotion. When he found the page he was looking for he turned to Carlo and Thérèse, who were waiting in silence.

“Ardiles was the Spanish captain who commissioned the coins and... some years later, got rid of the witnesses by burning the house of the Benassi family, our ancestors. The professor, or rather Baron Francisco Maria Ardiles y Bertrams, was a descendant of the captain and I wonder how he came to know the story. Perhaps the captain had left an account and the professor found it. Perhaps it was reading this memoir that stirred his recurrent dream of a burning house.”

“What I don’t understand,” said Carlo “is how he found the coin. What could be the connection?”

“Perhaps his ancestor had made a cast of it: like this,” said Thérèse, taking a five franc coin, covering it with a sheet of paper and rubbing a pencil over it.

Carlo watched her in surprise and then said, “Well, yes. What is so strange about

that? I was taught to do it at primary school.”

Siro sniggered complacently, then he took an object from the drawer and placed it in his waistcoat pocket, saying to Carlo,

“Well, now that you have all that money you can finally set up home on your own – my apologies Madame, *together* – and leave me in peace.”

“When I come to think about it,” said Thérèse seriously, “I don’t want anything to do with that money. There is something evil about it.”

She lit a match from the box that Carlo had left on the table and put it to the cheque.

Siro, who had been waving an antique fan, swiftly closed it and tapped Thérèse on the knuckles. She dropped the cheque and gave a surprised and annoyed glance at the old man.

“No, Madame. I would, although unwillingly, let you do what you wish if the cheque were yours. But that is not so.”

“But Father, I agree,” whispered Carlo in amazement.

“But it is not even your cheque. It is mine!” exclaimed Siro, shifting in his chair. He looked at them both with an air that was both defiant and indulgent and he repeated,

“It is my cheque, because the coin, the one that was stolen, belonged to me.”

He took from his waistcoat pocket the object that he had previously taken from the drawer and placed it on the table before Carlo and Thérèse.

“This,” he hissed with feline calm, “is the coin that you call cursed. The one that Thérèse – I hope I may call you that my dear – brought from the United States. I substituted it with the one I found in the book, my coin, when you returned from that marvellous day on Monte Verità.

You see these tiny scratches. The other one, the one that had remained for three hundred years hidden in the book, was as smooth as glass.”

Carlo and Thérèse stared at him.

“Is this true? Then...” said Carlo, “the séance in Nice?”

“Carlo spoke...” stuttered Thérèse.



“It was all done with the *wrong* coin, we could say,” answered Siro.

“The professor Baron Francisco Maria Ardiles y Bertrams, had great skill in influencing not only those around him, but also himself. I am certain that he did not call down any spirits but, unconsciously, he hypnotised Carlo and induced him to tell the story, in the voice of poor Alfonso Benassi, a story that Carlo already knew.

I am convinced that the poor baron was afflicted by a psychological condition that made him take on the semblance of his ancestor: it was a professor from Zurich that I once met, Eugenio Bleuler, who called this illness ‘schizophrenia’. He invited me to one of his lessons where we studied a patient afflicted by this illness: I saw inkwells flung against the wall and pens shot into doors... without anyone going anywhere near them. That is what you saw in Nice! The psychological crisis of a poor sick man. How sad!”

Carlo tried to contradict him, then he stopped and shook his head.

“But what about all those historical cases that you yourself told me about, Rasputin, Marie Duplessis, not to mention poor Nick van Buren?”

“Sad coincidences, my dear children, or at worst self-suggestion. If, for example, to play a nasty trick on him, you had made a gift of the coin to that Polish gentleman at Drouot, that half-Neapolitan, well, I imagine that he would have breathed his last almost immediately.”

Siro leaned over the desk and picked up the cheque that Thérèse had dropped.

“So, in conclusion, since the coin that was stolen by the baron belonged to me, the cheque is mine and I will do what I want with it.”

He opened the desk drawer, took out an envelope, placed the cheque in it and with his fountain pen, a beautiful speckled Aurora, he wrote something on it.

“You know,” he said calmly closing and sealing the envelope, “at my age, what I wish for most is peace and quiet. What better use for this cheque than to ensure that my son can finally buy a house and leave me in peace?”

He got up and ceremoniously handed the envelope to Thérèse.

“This is my wedding present.”

Carlo and Thérèse stared at him in surprise.

Siro looked at them, pretending to be concerned.

“Don’t tell me that you have changed your minds? It’s not possible.”

“But, how did you know that we had decided to...?” asked Thérèse smiling.

“I have no idea,” he answered, moving towards the window, “perhaps I have the skills of a medium. Come on, let’s go and eat, it is almost midday and I am hungry. You, Thérèse, must tell me your story as we go, because you know that we old ones like love stories. It is incredible how sentimental one becomes with age.”

“Very, very sentimental!” concluded Carlo as he locked the door and Siro walked away, arm in arm with Thérèse.

### *Locarno – October 11<sup>th</sup> 1931*

It had not been easy for Eugenio Fantone to convince the manager of the funicular railway, *Locarno-Madonna del Sasso*, to allow the exclusive use of the line between eleven-thirty and midday of that particular Sunday.

He had been particularly insistent, even involving some acquaintances in Bellinzona, so that the guests at the christening of his friend Carlo’s first child and the wedding reception of Carlo and Thérèse, could descend directly from the mountain sanctuary to the Grand Hôtel Locarno, where the gala lunch would be held.

The guests arriving from outside Locarno had been booked into the hotel since the day before. Michele had come from Paris. When he arrived, he had hugged Carlo and stared at him without speaking, as if to say ‘I told you so’.

Since Michele had forecast this event a year earlier, he had hoped to be named as godfather, but this honour was reserved for Eugenio. Michele thought about it and decided that the role was more suited to a practical person like Eugenio, and not a dreamer like him. However, Carlo kept his promise and the child was called Michele.

The only regret, for Carlo, was that his friend Lucas Cortes, who was busy preparing for a performance in Vienna, would not be able to be present. He had sent a thousand profuse apologies.

The weather, which in that season of the year was always changeable, was extraordinarily mild on that particular Sunday, so that the hundred guests were able to enjoy the panorama from the terrace before the Sanctuary of the Madonna del Sasso on a beautifully sunny day.

The lunch, set in the dining room of the Grand Hôtel Locarno, was coming to an end and some of the guests were leaving, when a small orchestra that had been playing quietly to avoid waking the child, suddenly fell silent. The couple and the other guests turned questioningly towards the orchestra but the conductor simply waved his hands, as if to say, 'that is what I was told to do'.

Behind them, hidden by a screen came a song, first faint and then louder, *Je crois entendre encore* from Bizet's opera *Les pêcheurs de perles*.

It was a surreal situation with the enchanted guests staring at the screen, the hotel staff stopped in their tracks and guests from the hotel peeking in at the door.

When the song died away with the last words ... *O souvenir charmant* ... Lucas Cortes appeared from behind the screen, wearing a beige morning suit, a white walking stick in his hand and a beige top hat on his head.

He swept off his top hat and ran towards the couple: first, he kissed Thérèse and then, with a laugh, he hugged Carlo and finally he took the child from its cradle, looked at it tenderly and returned it to its mother.

"Why this is too wonderful, are you sure it is you?" asked Carlo laughing.

Then, to the applause of everyone present, Lucas ran out of the room and climbed into the white Isotta Fraschini waiting for him at the hotel entrance, and was driven off towards Locarno.

By now, only a few close friends were left, Eugenio with his wife Chiara, who had been asked to be godmother were playing with their godchild. Siro, who was sitting beside Thérèse, with a particularly satisfied air, leaned forward and spoke

to Carlo.

“I was forgetting something. This is yours now and you can pass it on to your son when he is older, he will pass it on to his son and so on.”

He took the famous coin out of his waistcoat pocket and flipped it over to Carlo. Perhaps it was the excitement of the day, or the champagne he had drunk, but Carlo missed the catch and the coin fell onto the marble table, bounced twice with a dull sound and stopped.

“What a strange sound,” said Eugenio, who had been distracted for a moment from his godchild.

“What is strange?” asked Siro.

“It is a doubly false coin. The person who commissioned it did so to play a trick, and the person who made it cheated on the metal. A bad penny always turns up!”

# EPILOGUE

*Seattle – April 24<sup>th</sup> 1974*

The man picked up a newspaper from the pile, the *Oregon Tribune*, and threw a coin to the paperboy who thanked him with a wave.

He glanced at the headlines and stopped suddenly, saying to the friend who had been walking beside him and had stopped a few metres ahead in surprise.

“Hey! Did you see who is dead? That beer guy!”

“What, Old Joe?”

“That’s him, look here.”

## **The death of Uncle Joe**

*Tacoma, April 24<sup>th</sup> 1974*

*Jean-Luc Benoit, the well-known ‘Uncle Joe’ died yesterday at his ranch ‘La Maison de Jean’, surrounded by his numerous family. He had just turned 84 years of age.*

*He arrived in Seattle in the thirties, during the Great Depression and began working as a labourer at the Jehnsen flourmill, which supplied flour to the entire county.*

*When the mill failed, he had the idea of using the grain for a different purpose and he founded, here in Tacoma, the van Buren brewery, famous for the Uncle Joe label.*

*Mr Benoit, whom everyone knew by the nickname of Uncle Joe, died yesterday at 06:15 after a brief illness.*

*His son Armel, who has managed the more than twenty van Buren factories for the last fifteen years, stated that the company founded by his father...*

**A bad coin always turns up**

is available free of charge for all MANYBOOKS readers.

I do please those friends who read it to let me know if they liked the book as well as if they didn't and possibly why.

Thanks a lot.

Alberto

**lagardia.book@gmail.com**

### *The author*

Alberto Guardia was born in 1955 in Biella a town in the north-west of Italy.

He is happily married to Annalisa.

Despite his technical formation, he holds a PhD in nuclear powerplants (don't laugh...that's not a joke), he can read (believe me this is not very common in the category) and even write.

Most of his books are a blend of historical fiction and soft mystery.

In 2014, published 'Una lunga storia' a novel set in the Biella district.

The second novel "Come una moneta falsa" was first published in 2014 too.

A third novel, La Gàrdia, published in 2016, is based on a neglected historical fact:

the ethnic cleansing of a Waldenser minority in the south of Italy in the mid of 16th century.

The last novel, newly published in 2018, is a mystery plot.

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All books are available in e-book and paperback formats in all Amazon bookstores.

The only novel available in english is **“A bad coin always turns up”**

It is the english version of "Come una moneta falsa".

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