

## A Different Drama

“Give me a name for this character. He’s a boy from a poor family in the South of Italy. Calabria I’m thinking, or maybe Sicily.”

John was looking to Angelica for a suggestion. A pile of about fifty pages of type, clipped together, lay on the bare wooden table between them. This was the historical novel that John had been writing for more than two years. Angelica had promised to help him this afternoon; the views of an Italian should be useful.

John had long been fascinated by the *Risorgimento*, Italy’s fight to throw off its foreign oppressors in the nineteenth century. The character he most admired was not Garibaldi, the heroic man of action, but Giuseppe Mazzini, the saintly idealist who, from his exile in London, inspired the Italian people to rise and claim their freedom. Mazzini would be the hero of his novel. Today, a Saturday, John had travelled on the District Line from Wimbledon to meet Angelica in Bishop's Park.

They first met at a coffee bar on Victoria Street, five weeks ago. She looked unhappy, close to tears, and he suggested a walk in St James' Park. The sun was shining and she accepted. Since then all their meetings had been in the park - clandestine encounters in Angelica's lunch hour. “Guy would kill me if he knew,” she said.

She had told him about her boy-friend – good-looking and ambitious, but with a terrible temper. He could be cruel and sarcastic, often ridiculing her Italian accent. “Don't ask me why I stay with him,” she would say, “I really don't know.” Being so different to Guy should work in his favour, John reckoned. He was falling in love and he would be patient. Guy was away in Brussels this weekend, for his work.

As the train crossed the river at Putney John saw the sky getting darker. Drops of rain began to streak the window. They would have to shelter in the park café, their meeting place. They would not be able to stroll by the river or lie side-by-side on the warm grass, as he had hoped. But they would be together and that was enough.

“What does he look like, this boy?” Angelica asked, “what kind of person you making him?”

“Is that going to affect his name?”

“*Ma certo* - of course it is. In a story the name has to fit the person – look at your Dickens.” She thought for a moment and then continued, “the names we got – you don't think they affect us?” A mischievous gleam came into her eye. “Look at me - an angel!”

“And me?”

“John. Very common!”

He gave her a wry smile and looked round the café. At a nearby table a young man was sitting with two little fair-haired girls, evidently his daughters. The only other customers were two mothers, in the armchairs in the corner of the room, their buggies parked next to them. He turned back to Angelica. She was simply dressed, as always, in jeans with a white t-shirt and blue canvas shoes. In the dull light her eyes were big and dark, under wide, straight brows.

“Anyway,” he said, “you asked me what this Italian boy is like. Well - he’s good-natured and unselfish and...”

“Surprise, surprise!” she said, smiling.

John drew back from the table. “What do you mean?”

“The people in your book – they all going to be so nice and gentle, like you?”

“No, of course not. There are bad characters too, like the traffickers who brought these Italian boys to London.”

“You know what I think?” she said, “Mazzini and the boy so good and kind - I think your story going to be boring unless you have one very bad man. Can you write a wicked person, John? I’m not so sure. But I can help you. I will tell you about this man, how he hate the children, make them suffer. I know.”

This was not the first time she had hinted at cruelty in her past, but John hadn't pressed her to tell him more; she could be so unpredictable. When the time seemed right he would get her to fill out this evil character for his novel and then her own story would emerge.

Angelica held her glass of fruit juice to her mouth, taking small sips. “You’re a dreamer, aren't you John?” she said, “just like Mazzini. He’s your hero, isn’t he?”

“Mazzini had impossible dreams,” John said, “but he made them come true. You know he was sentenced to death in Italy, and then he was expelled from France and Switzerland.”

“So he came to London. Yes, I know. And here they loved him.”

John nodded. “Anyway, back to this boy. He’s what they used to call an organ-boy. He’s miserable, but he dreams of a better life.”

“Another dreamer! Tell me - is he in the story here already?” She tapped the pages on the table. John nodded.

“And what have you called him?”

“Ugo”

Angelica’s mouth opened in amazement. “The nice little boy who dreams is called Ugo! Ugly name!” She picked up the typed papers and took a playful swipe at John.

“Hey, watch out!” He grabbed the manuscript and made as if to retaliate. Angelica faced him, hands down at her sides.

“Come on - hit me Johnny, hit me!”

“Don’t call me Johnny.” He threw the papers down on the table. “Come on, Angelica, let’s get back to the story.”

She made a sulky face. “OK – so, this nice little boy. I think he needs what you call a pet name, maybe something his little sister used to call him, like Beppe or Pippo.”

“Ah! Yes, I like that. I’ll call him Pippo.”

She picked up the papers and flicked through them. “History novel must have romance. So tell me about the love in Mazzini’s life. We never learn about that at school.”

“Well, there was a lady; Giuditta Sidoli she was called. I think she represented his ideal. They corresponded for years.”

“Long distance lovers. No nasty moods to spoil it all. Maybe I go away and you can write me beautiful letters. You can imagine me perfect.”

“No thanks. I’ll take the moods any day.”

Angelica returned to her questioning: “What about all these children he helped?”

“They were sent out by the slave-masters to roam the streets, selling statuettes or operating barrel organs.”

“So what happens to little Pippo in the story? He gets rescued by the nice Mr Mazzini I suppose.”

“Yes. Mr Mazzini, as you call him, has founded a school for these boys. Pippo goes to classes in the evening. He's a bright boy, he's learning fast. Then Mr Mazzini raises funds for an insurrection in Italy, in the Papal State. When he sets off Pippo goes with him.”

“Dangerous for him.”

“He wants to go; he’s nearly sixteen now.”

“And you don’t have to tell me what happens; I know my history. This – insurrection, you call it – fails. People die and Mr Mazzini is back in London. In the drawing rooms, smoking his cigars.”

“Cheap cheroots - his mother sends them; they’re his only indulgence. She never sends anything of value; she knows he would only give it away.” There was a tremor in John’s voice as he spoke of his hero. “One winter he gave his only coat to some needy person and couldn’t go out at all.” He looked Angelica in the eye. “The failure of these plots affects him terribly. He suffers for the loss of life.”

“And Pippo?”

“Pippo goes missing, but in the end he gets back to London.”

“But why, John? Pippo was in Italy, where he was born. Exciting time for him. The country in pieces, ruled by Austrians, French, Spanish and goodness knows who. But the people are waking up.”

“Yes, awakened by Mazzini, his organisation *La Giovine Italia* - Young Italy.”

“But why you make Pippo come back to London, where he was miserable?” Angelica sat up straight and placed her palms flat on the table. “No, I tell *you* what happens, John. Pippo is turning into a tough guy. He is with people fighting for freedom.”

“OK, so where is the story going?”

“Is going from place to place – *sabotaggio*, small battles. He’s getting a dangerous man, young Pippo, a *bandito*. People afraid of him. Girls starting to fall for him too, but he’s always moving on.” Angelica spread her hands in an expansive gesture. “Next the story needs a big drama.”

“And where is that going to be?”

“*Rome!*” She answered with dramatic emphasis.

“1849 then?”

“Of course. The Pope has run away. Rome is free!”

“And at the head of the new Republic?”

“Yes,” she said, “it’s Mr Mazzini. Sitting in the *Palazzo Quirinale*.”

“He hates the grand palace. He finds a small room where he can work.”

“But the French army is at the gates.” There was a breathless urgency now in Angelica’s voice, her hands never still. “Pippo is with Garibaldi, defending the city. They are holding on, but is desperate. Mazzini dreaming about his new government.”

“Mazzini is working night and day without sleep, to build the new republic.”

“But the new republic getting smaller every day. Garibaldi and his men are fighting – *corpo a corpo*.” She menaced John with an imaginary sword. “But they are not winning. Mazzini wasting his time.”

“Mazzini is planning a government that is not just for Rome but an example to the world. ‘Here in Rome we may not be moral mediocrities’ he says.” Angelica didn’t hear him; she was in Rome, at the barricades, living out the drama.

“*Disastro!* Garibaldi coming to the Senate, telling them the city is lost. Pippo walking beside him, blood on his face, all over his clothes. His sword so bent it won’t go in the...how do you say...?”

“The scabbard.”

“*Scabbard!*” She seemed to relish the sound of the word. Then she let out a long breath and shook her head sadly. “The dream is finished. The Republic of Rome lasted only five months. Garibaldi escapes, Pippo too, in a fishing boat. Mazzini back in London.” She reached

for her glass and leaned back, holding it between her hands. “There’s your story! Your quiet boy has become a fighter.”

“But it ends badly then.”

“No. Is not finished.”

John smiled. “Where does it go next, then?”

She thought for a moment. “Next some romance – in Genova. Pippo has fallen in love. She is from a noble family, with a famous name. They are proud to have him as a son-in-law. He is a hero now.” She paused before continuing, “Then he sails with Garibaldi and the ‘*Mille*’, the famous Thousand. To Sicily to fight the huge Bourbon army.”

“More drama.”

“Yes. Most of the Thousand are not soldiers, you know. They are poets and artists and teachers. But with Garibaldi to lead them they are *vittoriosi!*” She shouted the word. “There is how your story going to end.”

“And when Garibaldi fights his way to Rome again the whole of Italy is free. King Victor Emanuel on the throne.”

“Mazzini’s dream,” she said.

“Not really, no,” John said, “he dreamed of a republic. He can’t accept the monarchy. He refuses the honours they want to give him.”

“Typical!” she said. “The good Mr Mazzini.” She looked over to the window, where the rain had almost stopped. She picked up John’s manuscript, held it for a moment in both hands and then let it fall to the table. Now she spoke in a gentler voice: “Oh John...John, John, John. Why you never get angry with me?”

John took her hands in his. “Angelica,” he said, “You’ve told me about Guy – how he treats you. Are you really looking for another angry man?”

Angelica hung her head. Then she shook it slowly from side to side. She looked up. Her eyes followed the two little girls, who were skipping towards the door, running their hands across the empty tables and chanting the words of a song. Their father followed them, smiling. John watched Angelica, saw her brush away a tear. The sight of a loving father was painful to her.

She stood up and held out a hand. “Come,” she said, “my Mazzini man. Tell me what we are going to do now.”

“We are going to Guy’s place,” he replied. Angelica looked puzzled. “We’re going to pick up your stuff.”

“No John, I can’t. Please.”