

Nisida

by

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If our readers, tempted by the Italian proverb about seeing Naples and then dying, were to ask us what is the most favourable moment for visiting the enchanted city, we should advise them to land at the mole, or at Mergellina, on a fine summer day and at the hour when some solemn procession is moving out of the cathedral. Nothing can give an idea of the profound and simple-hearted emotion of this populace, which has enough poetry in its soul to believe in its own happiness. The whole town adorns herself and attires herself like a bride for her wedding; the dark facades of marble and granite disappear beneath hangings of silk and festoons of flowers; the wealthy display their dazzling luxury, the poor drape themselves proudly in their rags. Everything is light, harmony, and perfume; the sound is like the hum of an immense hive, interrupted by a thousandfold outcry of joy impossible to describe. The bells repeat their sonorous sequences in every key; the arcades echo afar with the triumphal marches of military bands; the sellers of sherbet and water-melons sing out their deafening flourish from throats of copper. People form into groups; they meet, question, gesticulate; there are gleaming looks, eloquent gestures, picturesque attitudes; there is a general animation, an unknown charm, an indefinable intoxication. Earth is very near to heaven, and it is easy to understand that, if God were to banish death from this delightful spot, the Neapolitans would desire no other paradise.

The story that we are about to tell opens with one of these magical pictures. It was the Day of the Assumption in the year 1825; the sun had been up some four or five hours, and the long Via da Forcella, lighted from end to end by its slanting rays, cut the town in two, like a ribbon of watered silk. The lava pavement, carefully cleaned, shone like any mosaic, and the royal troops, with their proudly waving plumes, made a double living hedge on each side of the street. The balconies, windows, and terraces, the stands with their unsubstantial balustrades, and the wooden galleries set up during the night, were loaded with spectators, and looked not unlike the boxes of a theatre. An immense crowd, forming a medley of the brightest colours, invaded the reserved space and broke through the military barriers, here and there, like an overflowing torrent. These intrepid sightseers, nailed to their places, would have waited half their lives without giving the least sign of impatience.

At last, about noon, a cannon-shot was heard, and a cry of general satisfaction followed it. It was the signal that the procession had crossed the threshold of the church. In the same moment a charge of carabinieri swept off the people who were obstructing the middle of the street, the regiments of the line opened floodgates for the overflowing crowd, and soon nothing remained on the causeway but some scared dog, shouted at by the people, hunted off by the soldiers, and fleeing at full speed. The procession came out through the Via di Vescovato. First came the guilds of merchants and craftsmen, the hatters, weavers, bakers, butchers, cutlers, and goldsmiths. They wore the prescribed

dress: black coats, knee breeches, low shoes and silver buckles. As the countenances of these gentlemen offered nothing very interesting to the multitude, whisperings arose, little by little, among the spectators, then some bold spirits ventured a jest or two upon the fattest or the baldest of the townsmen, and at last the boldest of the lazzaroni slipped between the soldiers' legs to collect the wax that was running down from the lighted tapers.

After the craftsmen, the religious orders marched past, from the Dominicans to the Carthusians, from the Carmelites to the Capuchins. They advanced slowly, their eyes cast down, their step austere, their hands on their hearts; some faces were rubicund and shining, with large cheek-bones and rounded chins, herculean heads upon bullnecks; some, thin and livid, with cheeks hollowed by suffering and penitence, and with the look of living ghosts; in short, here were the two sides of monastic life.

At this moment, Nunziata and Gelsomina, two charming damsels, taking advantage of an old corporal's politeness, pushed forward their pretty heads into the first rank. The break in the line was conspicuous; but the sly warrior seemed just a little lax in the matter of discipline.

"Oh, there is Father Bruno!" said Gelsomina suddenly. "Good-day, Father Bruno."

"Hush, cousin! People do not talk to the procession."

"How absurd! He is my confessor. May I not say good-morning to my confessor?"

"Silence, chatterboxes!"

"Who was that spoke?"

"Oh, my dear, it was Brother Cucuzza, the begging friar."

"Where is he? Where is he?"

"There he is, along there, laughing into his beard. How bold he is!"

"Ah, God in heaven! If we were to dream of him---"

While the two cousins were pouring out endless comments upon the Capuchins and their beards, the capes of the canons and the surplices of the seminarists, the 'feroci' came running across from the other side to re-establish order with the help of their gun-stocks.

"By the blood of my patron saint," cried a stentorian voice, "if I catch you between my finger and thumb, I will straighten your back for the rest of your days."

"Who are you falling out with, Gennaro?"

"With this accursed hunchback, who has been worrying my back for the last hour, as though he could see through it."

"It is a shame," returned the hunchback in a tone of lamentation; "I have been here since last night, I slept out of doors to keep my place, and here is this abominable giant comes to stick himself in front of me like an obelisk."

The hunchback was lying like a Jew, but the crowd rose unanimously against the obelisk. He was, in one way, their superior, and majorities are always made up of pigmies.

"Hi! Come down from your stand!"

"Hi! get off your pedestal!"

"Off with your hat!"

"Down with your head!"

"Sit down!"

"Lie down!"

This revival of curiosity expressing itself in invectives evidently betokened the crisis of the show. And indeed the chapters of canons, the clergy and bishops, the pages and chamberlains, the representatives of the city, and the gentlemen of the king's chamber now appeared, and finally the king himself, who, bare-headed and carrying a taper, followed the magnificent statue of the Virgin. The contrast was striking: after the grey-headed monks and pale novices came brilliant young captains, affronting heaven with the points of their moustaches, riddling the latticed windows with killing glances, following the procession in an absent-minded way, and interrupting the holy hymns with scraps of most unorthodox conversation.

"Did you notice, my dear Doria, how like a monkey the old Marchesa d'Acquasparta takes her raspberry ice?"

"Her nose takes the colour of the ice. What fine bird is showing off to her?"

"It is the Cyrenian."

"I beg your pardon! I have not seen that name in the Golden Book."

"He helps the poor marquis to bear his cross."

The officer's profane allusion was lost in the prolonged murmur of admiration that suddenly rose from the crowd, and every gaze was turned upon one of the young girls who was strewing flowers before the holy Madonna. She was an exquisite creature. Her head glowing in the sun shine, her feet hidden amid roses and broom-blossom, she rose, tall and fair, from a pale cloud of incense, like some seraphic apparition. Her hair, of velvet blackness, fell in curls half-way down her shoulders; her brow, white as alabaster and polished as a mirror, reflected the rays of the sun; her beautiful and finely arched black eye-brows melted into the opal of her temples; her eyelids were fast down, and the curled black fringe of lashes veiled a glowing and liquid glance of divine emotion; the nose, straight, slender, and cut by two easy nostrils, gave to her profile that character of antique beauty which is vanishing day by day from the earth. A calm and serene smile, one of those smiles that have already left the soul and not yet reached the lips, lifted the corners of her mouth with a pure expression of infinite beatitude and gentleness. Nothing could be more perfect than the chin that completed the faultless oval of this radiant countenance; her neck of a dead white, joined her bosom in a delicious curve, and supported her head gracefully like the stalk of a flower moved by a gentle breeze. A bodice of crimson velvet spotted with gold outlined her delicate and finely curved figure, and held in by means of a handsome gold lace the countless folds of a full and flowing skirt, that fell to her feet like those severe robes in which the Byzantine painters preferred to drape their angels. She was indeed a marvel, and so rare and modest of beauty had not been seen within the memory of man.

Among those who had gazed most persistently at her was observed the young Prince of Brancaleone, one of the foremost nobles of the kingdom. Handsome, rich, and brave, he had, at five-and-twenty, outdone the lists of all known Don Juans. Fashionable young women spoke very ill of him and adored him in secret; the most virtuous made it their rule to fly from him, so impossible did resistance

appear. All the young madcaps had chosen him for their model; for his triumphs robbed many a Miltiades of sleep, and with better cause. In short, to get an idea of this lucky individual, it will be enough to know that as a seducer he was the most perfect thing that the devil had succeeded in inventing in this progressive century. The prince was dressed out for the occasion in a sufficiently grotesque costume, which he wore with ironic gravity and cavalier ease. A black satin doublet, knee breeches, embroidered stockings, and shoes with gold buckles, formed the main portions of his dress, over which trailed a long brocaded open-sleeved robe lined with ermine, and a magnificent diamond-hilted sword. On account of his rank he enjoyed the rare distinction of carrying one of the six gilded staves that supported the plumed and embroidered canopy.

As soon as the procession moved on again, Eligi of Brancaleone gave a side glance to a little man as red as a lobster, who was walking almost at his side, and carrying in his right hand, with all the solemnity that he could muster, his excellency's hat. He was a footman in gold-laced livery, and we beg leave to give a brief sketch of his history. Trespolo was the child of poor but thieving parents, and on that account was early left an orphan. Being at leisure, he studied life from an eminently social aspect. If we are to believe a certain ancient sage, we are all in the world to solve a problem: as to Trespolo, he desired to live without doing anything; that was his problem. He was, in turn, a sacristan, a juggler, an apothecary's assistant, and a cicerone, and he got tired of all these callings. Begging was, to his mind, too hard work, and it was more trouble to be a thief than to be an honest man. Finally he decided in favour of contemplative philosophy. He had a passionate preference for the horizontal position, and found the greatest pleasure in the world in watching the shooting of stars. Unfortunately, in the course of his meditations this deserving man came near to dying of hunger; which would have been a great pity, for he was beginning to accustom himself not to eat anything. But as he was predestined by nature to play a small part in our story, God showed him grace for that time, and sent to his assistance--not one of His angels, the rogue was not worthy of that, but--one of Brancaleone's hunting dogs. The noble animal sniffed round the philosopher, and uttered a little charitable growl that would have done credit to one of the brethren of Mount St. Bernard. The prince, who was returning in triumph from hunting, and who, by good luck, had that day killed a bear and ruined a countess, had an odd inclination to do a good deed. He approached the plebeian who was about to pass into the condition of a corpse, stirred the thing with his foot, and seeing that there was still a little hope, bade his people bring him along.

From that day onward, Trespolo saw the dream of his life nearly realised. Something rather above a footman and rather below a house steward, he became the confidant of his master, who found his talents most useful; for this Trespolo was as sharp as a demon and almost as artful as a woman. The prince, who, like an intelligent man as he was, had divined that genius is naturally indolent, asked nothing of him but advice; when tiresome people wanted thrashing, he saw to that matter himself, and, indeed, he was the equal of any two at such work. As nothing in this lower world, however, is complete, Trespolo had strange moments amid this life of delights; from time to time his happiness

was disturbed by panics that greatly diverted his master; he would mutter incoherent words, stifle violent sighs, and lose his appetite. The root of the matter was that the poor fellow was afraid of going to hell. The matter was very simple: he was afraid of everything; and, besides, it had often been preached to him that the Devil never allowed a moment's rest to those who were ill-advised enough to fall into his clutches. Trespolo was in one of his good moods of repentance, when the prince, after gazing on the young girl with the fierce eagerness of a vulture about to swoop upon its prey, turned to speak to his intimate adviser. The poor servant understood his master's abominable design, and not wishing to share the guilt of a sacrilegious conversation, opened his eyes very wide and turned them up to heaven in ecstatic contemplation. The prince coughed, stamped his foot, moved his sword so as to hit Trespolo's legs, but could not get from him any sign of attention, so absorbed did he appear in celestial thoughts. Brancaleone would have liked to wring his neck, but both his hands were occupied by the staff of the canopy; and besides, the king was present.

At last they were drawing nearer to the church of St. Clara, where the Neapolitan kings were buried, and where several princesses of the blood, exchanging the crown for the veil, have gone to bury themselves alive. The nuns, novices, and abbess, hidden behind shutters, were throwing flowers upon the procession. A bunch fell at the feet of the Prince of Brancaleone.

"Trespolo, pick up that nosegay," said the prince, so audibly that his servant had no further excuse. "It is from Sister Theresa," he added, in a low voice; "constancy is only to be found, nowadays, in a convent."

Trespolo picked up the nosegay and came towards his master, looking like a man who was being strangled.

"Who is that girl?" the latter asked him shortly.

"Which one?" stammered the servant.

"Forsooth! The one walking in front of us."

"I don't know her, my lord."

"You must find out something about her before this evening."

"I shall have to go rather far afield."

"Then you do know her, you intolerable rascal! I have half a mind to have you hanged like a dog."

"For pity's sake, my lord, think of the salvation of your soul, of your eternal life."

"I advise you to think of your temporal life. What is her name?"

"She is called Nisida, and is the prettiest girl in the island that she is named after. She is innocence itself. Her father is only a poor fisherman, but I can assure your excellency that in his island he is respected like a king."

"Indeed!" replied the prince, with an ironical smile. "I must own, to my great shame, that I have never visited the little island of Nisida. You will have a boat ready for me to-morrow, and then we will see."

He interrupted himself suddenly, for the king was looking at him; and calling up the most sonorous bass notes that he could find in the depths of his throat, he continued with an inspired air, "Genitori genitoque laus et jubilatio."

"Amen," replied the serving-man in a ringing voice.

Nisida, the beloved daughter of Solomon, the fisherman, was, as we have said, the loveliest flower of the island from which she derived her name. That island is the most charming spot, the most delicious nook with which we are acquainted; it is a basket of greenery set delicately amid the pure and transparent waters of the gulf, a hill wooded with orange trees and oleanders, and crowned at the summit by a marble castle. All around extends the fairy-like prospect of that immense amphitheatre, one of the mightiest wonders of creation. There lies Naples, the voluptuous syren, reclining carelessly on the seashore; there, Portici, Castellamare, and Sorrento, the very names of which awaken in the imagination a thousand thoughts of poetry and love; there are Pausilippo, Baiae, Puozzoli, and those vast plains, where the ancients fancied their Elysium, sacred solitudes which one might suppose peopled by the men of former days, where the earth echoes under foot like an empty grave, and the air has unknown sounds and strange melodies.

Solomon's hut stood in that part of the island which, turning its back to the capital, beholds afar the blue crests of Capri. Nothing could be simpler or brighter. The brick walls were hung with ivy greener than emeralds, and enamelled with white bell-flowers; on the ground floor was a fairly spacious apartment, in which the men slept and the family took their meals; on the floor above was Nisida's little maidenly room, full of coolness, shadows, and mystery, and lighted by a single casement that looked over the gulf; above this room was a terrace of the Italian kind, the four pillars of which were wreathed with vine branches, while its vine-clad arbour and wide parapet were overgrown with moss and wild flowers. A little hedge of hawthorn, which had been respected for ages, made a kind of rampart around the fisherman's premises, and defended his house better than deep moats and castellated walls could have done. The boldest roisterers of the place would have preferred to fight before the parsonage and in the precincts of the church rather than in front of Solomon's little enclosure. Otherwise, this was the meeting place of the whole island. Every evening, precisely at the same hour, the good women of the neighbourhood came to knit their woollen caps and tell the news. Groups of little children, naked, brown, and as mischievous as little imps, sported about, rolling on the grass and throwing handfuls of sand into the other's eyes, heedless of the risk of blinding, while their mothers were engrossed in that grave gossip which marks the dwellers in villages. These gatherings occurred daily before the fisherman's house; they formed a tacit and almost involuntary homage, consecrated by custom, and of which no one had ever taken special account; the envy that rules in small communities would soon have suppressed them. The influence which old Solomon had over his equals had grown so simply and naturally, that no one found any fault with it, and it had only attracted notice when everyone was benefiting by it, like those fine trees whose growth is only observed when we profit by their shade. If any dispute arose in the island, the two opponents preferred to abide by the judgment of the fisherman instead of going before the court; he was fortunate enough or clever enough to send away both parties satisfied. He knew what remedies to prescribe better than any physician, for it seldom happened that he or his had not felt the same ailments, and his

knowledge, founded on personal experience, produced the most excellent results. Moreover, he had no interest, as ordinary doctors have, in prolonging illnesses. For many years past the only formality recognised as a guarantee for the inviolability of a contract had been the intervention of the fisherman. Each party shook hands with Solomon, and the thing was done. They would rather have thrown themselves into Vesuvius at the moment of its most violent eruption than have broken so solemn an agreement. At the period when our story opens, it was impossible to find any person in the island who had not felt the effects of the fisherman's generosity, and that without needing to confess to him any necessities. As it was the custom for the little populace of Nisida to spend its leisure hours before Solomon's cottage, the old man, while he walked slowly among the different groups, humming his favourite song, discovered moral and physical weaknesses as he passed; and the same evening he or his daughter would certainly be seen coming mysteriously to bestow a benefit upon every sufferer, to lay a balm upon every wound. In short, he united in his person all those occupations whose business is to help mankind. Lawyers, doctors, and the notary, all the vultures of civilisation, had beaten a retreat before the patriarchal benevolence of the fisherman. Even the priest had capitulated.

On the morrow of the Feast of the Assumption, Solomon was sitting, as his habit was, on a stone bench in front of his house, his legs crossed and his arms carelessly stretched out. At the first glance you would have taken him for sixty at the outside, though he was really over eighty. He had all his teeth, which were as white as pearls, and showed them proudly. His brow, calm and restful beneath its crown of abundant white hair, was as firm and polished as marble; not a wrinkle ruffled the corner of his eye, and the gem-like lustre of his blue orbs revealed a freshness of soul and an eternal youth such as fable grants to the sea-gods. He displayed his bare arms and muscular neck with an old man's vanity. Never had a gloomy idea, an evil prepossession, or a keen remorse, arisen to disturb his long and peaceful life. He had never seen a tear flow near him without hurrying to wipe it; poor though he was, he had succeeded in pouring out benefits that all the kings of the earth could not have bought with their gold; ignorant though he was, he had spoken to his fellows the only language that they could understand, the language of the heart. One single drop of bitterness had mingled with his inexhaustible stream of happiness; one grief only had clouded his sunny life--the death of his wife--and moreover he had forgotten that.

All the affections of his soul were turned upon Nisida, whose birth had caused her mother's death; he loved her with that immoderate love that old people have for the youngest of their children. At the present moment he was gazing upon her with an air of profound rapture, and watching her come and go, as she now joined the groups of children and scolded them for games too dangerous or too noisy; now seated herself on the grass beside their mothers and took part with grave and thoughtful interest in their talk. Nisida was more beautiful thus than she had been the day before; with the vaporous cloud of perfume that had folded her round from head to foot had disappeared all that mystic poetry which put a sort of constraint upon her admirers and obliged them to lower their glances. She had become a daughter of Eve again without losing anything of her charm.

Simply dressed, as she usually was on work-days, she was distinguishable among her companions only by her amazing beauty and by the dazzling whiteness of her skin. Her beautiful black hair was twisted in plaits around the little dagger of chased silver, that has lately been imported into Paris by that right of conquest which the pretty women of Paris have over the fashions of all countries, like the English over the sea.

Nisida was adored by her young friends, all the mothers had adopted her with pride; she was the glory of the island. The opinion of her superiority was shared by everyone to such a degree, that if some bold young man, forgetting the distance which divided him from the maiden, dared speak a little too loudly of his pretensions, he became the laughing-stock of his companions. Even the past masters of tarentella dancing were out of countenance before the daughter of Solomon, and did not dare to seek her as a partner. Only a few singers from Amalfi or Sorrento, attracted by the rare beauty of this angelic creature, ventured to sigh out their passion, carefully veiled beneath the most delicate allusions. But they seldom reached the last verse of their song; at every sound they stopped short, threw down their triangles and their mandolines, and took flight like scared nightingales.

One only had courage enough or passion enough to brave the mockery; this was Bastiano, the most formidable diver of that coast. He also sang, but with a deep and hollow voice; his chant was mournful and his melodies full of sadness. He never accompanied himself upon any instrument, and never retired without concluding his song. That day he was gloomier than usual; he was standing upright, as though by enchantment, upon a bare and slippery rock, and he cast scornful glances upon the women who were looking at him and laughing. The sun, which was plunging into the sea like a globe of fire, shed its light full upon his stern features, and the evening breeze, as it lightly rippled the billows, set the fluttering reeds waving at his feet. Absorbed by dark thoughts, he sang, in the musical language of his country, these sad words:--

"O window, that wert used to shine in the night like an open eye, how dark thou art! Alas, alas! my poor sister is ill.

"Her mother, all in tears, stoops towards me and says, 'Thy poor sister is dead and buried.'

"Jesus! Jesus! Have pity on me! You stab me to the heart.

"Tell me, good neighbours, how it happened; repeat to me her last words.

"She had a burning thirst, and refused to drink because thou wast not there to give her water from thy hand.

"Oh, my sister! Oh, my sister!

"She refused her mother's kiss, because thou wast not there to embrace her.

"Oh, my sister! Oh, my sister!

"She wept until her last breath, because thou wast not there to dry her tears.

"Oh, my sister! Oh, my sister!

"We placed on her brow her wreath of orangeflowers, we covered her with a veil as white as snow; we laid her gently in her coffin.

"Thanks, good neighbours. I will go and be with her.

"Two angels came down from heaven and bore her away on their wings. Mary Magdalene came to meet her at the gate of heaven.

"Thanks, good neighbours. I will go and be with her.

"There, she was seated in a place of glory, a chaplet of rubies was given to her, and she is singing her rosary with the Virgin.

"Thanks, good neighbours. I will go and be with her."

As he finished the last words of his melancholy refrain, he flung himself from the top of his rock into the sea, as though he really desired to engulf himself. Nisida and the other women gave a cry of terror, for during some minutes the diver failed to reappear upon the surface.

"Are you out of your senses?" cried a young man who had suddenly appeared, unobserved among the women. "Why, what are you afraid of? You know very well that Bastiano is always doing things of this sort. But do not be alarmed: all the fishes in the Mediterranean will be drowned before any harm comes to him. Water is his natural element. Good-day, sister; good-day, father."

The young fisherman kissed Nisida on the forehead, drew near to his father, and, bowing his handsome head before him, took off his red cap and respectfully kissed the old man's hand. He came thus to ask his blessing every evening before putting out to sea, where he often spent the night fishing from his boat.

"May God bless thee, my Gabriel!" said the old man in a tone of emotion, as he slowly passed his hand over his son's black curls, and a tear came into his eye. Then, rising solemnly and addressing the groups around him, he added in a voice full of dignity and of gentleness. "Come, my children, it is time to separate. The young to work, the old to rest. There is the angelus ringing."

Everybody knelt, and after a short prayer each went on his way. Nisida, after having given her father the last daily attentions, went up to her room, replenished the oil in the lamp that burned day and night before the Virgin, and, leaning her elbow on the window ledge, divided the branches of jasmine which hung like perfumed curtains, began to gaze out at the sea, and seemed lost in a deep, sweet reverie.

At this very time, a little boat, rowed silently by two oarsmen, touched shore on the other side of the island. It had become quite dark. A little man first landed cautiously, and respectfully offered his hand to another individual, who, scorning that feeble support, leapt easily ashore.

"Well, knave," he cried, "are my looks to your taste?"

"Your lordship is perfect."

"I flatter myself I am. It is true that, in order to make the transformation complete, I chose the very oldest coat that displayed its rags in a Jew's shop."

"Your lordship looks like a heathen god engaged in a love affair. Jupiter has sheathed his thunderbolts and Apollo has pocketed his rays."

"A truce to your mythology. And, to begin with, I forbid you to call me 'your lordship.'"

"Yes, your lordship."

"If my information that I have procured during the day is correct, the house must be on the other side of the island, in a most remote and lonely spot. Walk at a

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