

FANTASY

A NOVEL

BY
MATILDE SERAO

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INTRODUCTION.

The most prominent imaginative writer of the latest generation in Italy is a woman. What little is known of the private life of Matilde Serao adds, as forcibly as what may be divined from the tenour and material of her books, to the impression that every student of literary history must have formed of the difficulties which hem in the intellectual development of an ambitious girl. Without unusual neglect, unusual misfortune, it seems impossible for a woman to arrive at that experience which is essential to the production of work which shall be able to compete with the work of the best men. It is known that the elements of hardship and enforced adventure have not been absent from the career of the distinguished Italian novelist. Madame Serao has learned in the fierce school of privation what she teaches to us with so much beauty and passion in her stories.

Matilde Serao was born on the 17th of March 1856, in the little town of Patras, on the western coast of Greece. Her father was a Neapolitan political exile, her mother a Greek princess, the last survivor of an ancient noble family. I know not under what circumstances she came to the Italian home of her father, but it was probably in 1861 or soon afterwards that the unification of Italy permitted his return. At an early age, however, she seems to have been left without resources. She received a rough education at the Scuola Normale in Naples, and she obtained a small clerkship in the telegraph office at Rome. Literature, however, was the profession she designed to excel

in, and she showed herself a realist at once. Her earliest story, if I do not mistake, was that minute picture of the vicissitudes of a post-office which is named *Telegrafi dello Stato* ("State Telegraphs"). She worked with extreme energy, she taught herself shorthand, and she presently quitted the post-office to become a reporter and a journalist. To give herself full scope in this new employment, she, as I have been assured, cut short her curly crop of hair, and adopted on occasion male costume. She soon gained a great proficiency in reporting, and advanced to the writing of short sketches and stories for the newspapers. The power and originality of these attempts were acknowledged, and the name of Matilde Serao gradually became one of those which irresistibly attracted public attention. The writer of these lines may be permitted to record the impression which more than ten years ago was made upon him by reading a Neapolitan sketch, signed by that then wholly obscure name, in a chance number of the Roman *Fanfulla*.

The short stories were first collected in a little volume in 1879. In 1880 Matilde Serao became suddenly famous by the publication of the charming story *Fantasia* ("Fantasy"), which is now first presented to an English public. It was followed by a much weaker study of Neapolitan life, *Cuore Infermo* ("A Heart Diseased"). In 1881 she published "The Life and Adventures of Riccardo Joanna," to which she added a continuation in 1885. It is not possible to enumerate all Madame Serao's successive publications, but the powerful romance *La Conquista di Roma* ("The Conquest of Rome"), 1882, must not be omitted. This is a very careful and highly finished study of bureaucratic ambition, admirably characterised. Since then she has written in rapid succession several volumes of collected short stories, dealing

with the oddities of Neapolitan life, and a curious novel, "The Virtue of Cecchina," 1884. Her latest romances, most of them short, have been *Terno Secco* ("A Dry Third"), a very charming episode of Italian life, illustrating the frenzied interest taken in the public lotteries, 1887; *Addio Amore* ("Good-bye Love"), 1887; *La Granda Fiamma*, 1889; and *Sogno di una notte d'estate* ("A Summer Night's Dream"), 1890.

The naturalism of Matilde Serao deserves to be distinguished from that of the French contemporaries with whom she is commonly classed. She has a finer passion, more of the true ardour of the South, than Zola or Maupassant, but her temperament is distinctly related to that of Daudet. She is an idealist working in the school of realism; she climbs, on scaffolding of minute prosaic observation, to heights which are emotional and often lyrical. But her most obvious merit is the acuteness with which she has learned to collect and arrange in artistic form the elements of the town life of Southern Italy. She still retains in her nature something of the newspaper reporter's quicksilver, but it is sublimated by the genius of a poet.

EDMUND GOSSE.

FANTASY.

PART I.

I.

“The discipline for to-morrow is this....” said the preacher, reading from a small card. “You will sacrifice to the Virgin Mary all the sentiments of rancour that you cherish in your hearts, and you will kiss the schoolfellow, the teacher, or the servant whom you think you hate.”

In the twilight of the chapel there was a slight stir among the grown-up girls and teachers; the little ones remained quiet; some of them were asleep, others yawned behind tiny hands, and their small round faces twitched with weariness. The sermon had lasted an hour; and the poor children had not understood a word of it. They were longing for supper and bed. The preacher had now descended from the pulpit, and Cherubina Friscia, the teacher who acted as sacristan, was lighting the candles with a taper. By degrees the chapel became flooded with light. The cheeks of the dazed, sleepy little girls flushed pink under it; their elders stood immovable, with blinking startled eyes, and weary indifferent faces. Some prayed, with bowed heads, while the candle-light played with the thick plaits of their hair, coiled close to the neck, and with certain blonde curls that no comb could restrain. Then, when the whole chapel was lighted for the recital of the Rosary, the group of girl scholars in white muslin frocks, with black aprons and the various coloured ribbons by which the classes were

distinguished, assumed a gay aspect, despite the general weariness. A deep sigh escaped Lucia Altimare.

“What ails thee?” queried Caterina Spaccapietra, under her breath.

“I suffer, I suffer,” murmured the other dreamily. “This preacher saddens me. He does not understand, he does not feel, Our Lady.” And the black pupils of her eyes, set in bluish white, dilated as in a vision. Caterina did not reply. The Directress intoned the Rosary in a solemn voice, with a strong Tuscan accent. She read the Mystery alone. Then all the voices in chorus, shrill and low, accompanied her in the *Gloria Patri*, and in the *Pater*.

She repeated the *Ave Maria* as far as the *Frutto del tuo ventre*; the teachers and pupils taking up the words in unison. The chapel filled with music, the elder pupils singing with a fulness of voice that sounded like the outpouring of their souls: but the little ones made a game of it. While the Directress, standing alone, repeated the verses, they counted the time, so that they might all break in at the end with a burst, and nudging each other, tittered under their breath. Some of them would lean over the backs of the chairs, assuming a devout collectedness, but in reality pulling out the hair of the playfellows in front of them. Some played with their rosaries under their pinafores, with an audible click of the beads. The vigilant eye of the Directress watched over the apparently exemplary elder girls; she saw that Carolina Pentasuglia wore a carnation at the button-hole of her bodice, though no carnations grew in the College gardens; that a little square of paper was perceptible in the bosom of Ginevra Avigliana, beneath the muslin of her

gown; that Artemisia Minichini, with the short hair and firm chin, had as usual crossed one leg over the other, in contempt of religion; she saw and noted it all. Lucia Altimare sat leaning forward, with wide open eyes fixed upon a candle, her mouth drawn slightly on one side; from time to time a nervous shock thrilled her. Close to her, Caterina Spaccapietra said her prayers in all tranquillity, her eyes void of sight, as was her face of motion and expression. The Directress said the words of the *Ave Maria* without thinking of their meaning, absent, preoccupied, getting through her prayers as rapidly as possible.

The restlessness of the little ones increased. They twisted about, and lightly raised themselves on their chairs, whispering to each other, and fidgeting with their rosaries. Virginia Friozzi had a live cricket in her pocket, with a fine silken thread tied round its claw; at first she had covered it with her hand to prevent its moving, then she had allowed it to peep out of the opening of her pocket, then she had taken it out and hidden it under her apron; at last she could not resist showing it to the neighbours on her right and on her left. The news spread, the children became agitated, restraining their laughter with difficulty, and no longer giving the responses in time. Suddenly the cricket dragged at the thread, and hopped off, limping, into the midst of the passage which divided the two rows of chairs. There was a burst of laughter.

“Friozzi will not appear in the parlour to-morrow,” said the Directress severely.

The child turned pale at the harshness of a punishment which would prevent her from seeing her mother.

Cherubina Friscia, the sacristan-teacher, of cadaverous complexion, and worn anæmic face, descended the altar steps, and confiscated the cricket. There was a moment of silence, and then they heard the gasping voice of Lucia Altimare murmuring, "Mary ... Mary ... divine Mary!"

"Pray silently, Altimare," gently suggested the Directress.

The Rosary began again, this time without interruption. All knelt down, with a great noise of moving chairs, and the Latin words were recited, almost chanted, in chorus. Caterina Spaccapietra rested her head against the back of the chair in front of her. Lucia Altimare had thrown herself down, shuddering, with her head on the straw seat, and arms hanging slack at her side.

"The blood will go to your head, Lucia," whispered her friend.

"Leave me alone," said Lucia.

The pupils rose from their knees. One of them, accompanied by a teacher, had mounted the steps leading to the little organ. The teacher played a simple devotional prelude for the Litany to the Virgin. A pure fresh voice, of brilliant quality, rang out, and permeated the chapel, waking its sleeping echoes; a young yearning voice, crying with the ardour of an invocation, "*Sancta Maria...!*" And from below, all the pupils responded in the minor key, "*Ora pro nobis!*" The singer stood in the light on the platform of the organ, her face turned towards the altar. She was Giovanna Casacalenda, a tall girl whose white raiment did not conceal her fine proportions; a girl with a massive head, upon which her dark hair was piled heavily, and with eyes so

black that they appeared as if painted. She stood there alone, isolated, infusing all the passion of her youth into her full mellow voice, delighting in the pleasure of singing as if she had freed herself, and lived in her song. The pupils turned to look at her, with the joy in music which is inherent in childhood. When the voice of Giovanna came down to them, the chorus rising from below answered, "*Ora pro nobis!*" She felt her triumph. With head erect, her wondrous black eyes swimming in a humid light, her right hand resting lightly on the wooden balustrade, her white throat throbbing as if for love, she intoned the medium notes, ran up to the highest ones, and came down gently to the lower, giving full expression to her song: "*Regina angelorum...*" One moment of silence, in which to enjoy the last notes; then from below, in enthusiastic answer, came childish and youthful voices: "*Ora pro nobis!*" The singer looked fixedly at the altar, but she seemed to see or hear something beyond it—a vision, or music inaudible to the others. Every now and then a breath passed through her song, lending it warmth, making it passionate; every now and then the voice thinned itself to a golden thread, that sounded like the sweet trill of a bird, while occasionally it sank to a murmur, with a delicious hesitation.

"Giovanna sees heaven," said Ginevra Avigliana to Artemisia Minichini.

"Or the stage," rejoined the other, sceptically.

Still, when Giovanna came to the poetic images by which the Virgin is designated—Gate of Heaven, Vase of Election, Tower of David—the girls' faces flushed in the ecstasy of that wondrous music: only Caterina Spaccapietra, who was

absorbed, did not join in, and Lucia Altimare, who wept silently. The tears coursed down her thin cheeks. They rained upon her bosom and her hands; they melted away on her apron; and she did not dry them. Caterina quietly passed her handkerchief to her. But she took no notice of it. The preacher, Father Capece, went up the altar steps for the benediction. The Litany ended with the *Agnus Dei*. The voice of the singer seemed overpowered by sheer fatigue. Once more all the pupils knelt, and the priest prayed. Giovanna, kneeling at the organ, breathed heavily. After five minutes of silent prayer, the organ pealed out again slowly over the bowed heads, and a thrilling resonant voice seemed to rise from mid-air towards heaven, lending its splendour to the Sacrament in the *Tantum Ergo*. Giovanna was no longer tired; indeed her song grew in power, triumphant and full of life, with an ebb and flow that were almost voluptuous. The throb of its passion passed over the youthful heads below, and a mystic sensation caused their hearts to flutter. In the intensity of their prayer, in the approach of the benediction, they realised the solemnity of the moment. It dominated and terrified them, until it was followed by a painful and exquisite prostration. Then all was silent. A bell rang three peals; for an instant Artemisia Minichini dared to raise her eyes; she alone; looking at the inert forms upon the chairs, looking boldly at the altar; after which, overcome by childish fear, she dropped them again.

The holy Sacrament, in its sphere of burnished gold, raised high in the priest's hands, shed its blessing on those assembled in the church.

"I am dying," gasped Lucia Altimare.

At the door of the chapel, in the long gas-lighted corridor, the teachers were waiting to muster the classes, and lead them to the refectory. The faces were still agitated, but the little ones hopped and skipped about, and prattled together, and pinched each other, in all the joyous exuberance of childhood released from durance vile. As their limbs unstiffened, they jostled each other, laughing the while. The teachers, running after some of them, scolding others, half threatening, half coaxing, tried to range them in a file of two and two. They began with the little ones, then came the elder children, and after them the grown-up girls. The corridor rang with voices, calling:

“The Blues, where are the Blues?” “Here they are, all of them.” “Friozzi is missing.” “Where is Friozzi of the Blues?” “Here!” “In line, and to the left, if you please.” “The Greens, in line the Greens, or no fruit for dinner to-morrow.” “Quick, the refectory bell has rung twice already.” “Federici of the Reds, walk straight!” “Young ladies of the White-and-Greens, the bell is ringing for the third time.” “Are the Tricolors all here?” “All.” “Casacalenda is missing.” “She is coming; she is still at the organ.” “Altimare is missing.” “Where is Altimare?”

“She was here just now, she must have disappeared in the bustle; shall I look for her?”

“Look; and come to the refectory with her.”

Then the corridor emptied, and the refectory filled with light and merriment. With measured, almost rhythmic step, Caterina went to and fro in the deserted passages, seeking her friend Altimare. She descended to the ground-floor, called her twice from the garden; no answer. Then she mounted the stairs again,

and entered the dormitory. The white beds formed a line under the crude gaslight; Lucia was not there. A shade of anxiety began to dawn on Caterina's rosy face. She passed by the chapel twice, without going in. But the third time, finding the door ajar, she made up her mind to enter. It was dark inside. A lamp burning before the Madonna, scarcely relieved the gloom. She passed on, half intimidated, despite her well-balanced nerves, for she was alone in the darkness, in church.

Along one of the altar steps, stretched out on the crimson velvet carpet, a white form was lying, with open arms and pallid face, a spectral figure. It was Lucia Altimare, who had fainted.

II.

The fan of Artemisia Minichini, made of a large sheet of manuscript, waved noisily to and fro.

"Minichini, you disturb the Professor," said Friscia, the assistant teacher, without raising her eyes from her crochet work.

"Friscia, you don't feel the heat?" returned Minichini, insolently.

"No."

"You are lucky to be so insensible."

In the class room, where the Tricolor young ladies were taking their lesson in Italian history, it was very hot. There were two windows opening upon the garden, a door leading to the corridor, three rows of benches, and twenty-four pupils. On a

high raised step stood the table and armchair of the Professor. The fans waved hither and thither, some vivaciously, some languidly. Here and there a head bent over its book as if weighted with drowsiness. Ginevra Avigliana stared at the Professor, nodding as if in approval, though her face expressed entire absence of mind. Minichini had put down her fan, opened her *pince-nez*, and fixed it impudently upon the Professor's face. With her nose tip-tilted, and a truant lock of hair curling on her forehead, she laughed her silent laugh that so irritated the teachers. The Professor explained the lesson in a low voice. He was small, spare, and pitiable. He might have been about two-and-thirty, but his emaciated face, whose dark colouring had yellowed with the pallor of some long illness, proclaimed him a convalescent. A big scholarly head surmounting the body of a dwarf, a wild thick mane in which some white hairs were already visible, proud yet shy eyes, a small dirty black beard, thinly planted towards the thin cheeks, completed his sad and pensive ugliness.

He spoke without gesture, his eyes downcast; occasionally his right hand moving so slightly. Its shadow on the wall seemed to belong to a skeleton, it was so thin and crooked. He proceeded slowly, picking his words. These girls intimidated him, some because of their intelligence, others because of their impertinence, others simply because of their sex. His scholastic austerity was perturbed by their shining eyes, by their graceful and youthful forms; their white garments formed a kind of mirage before his eyes. A pungent scent diffused itself throughout the class, although perfumes were prohibited; whence came it? And, at the end of the third bench, Giovanna Casacalenda, who paid not the slightest attention, sat, with

half-closed eyes, furiously nibbling a rose. Here in front, Lucia Altimare, with hair falling loose about her neck, one arm hanging carelessly over the bench, resting her brow against her hand and hiding her eyes, looked at the Professor through her fingers; every now and then she pressed her handkerchief to her too crimson lips, as if to mitigate their feverishness. The Professor felt upon him the gaze that filtered through her fingers; while, without looking at her, he could see Giovanna Casacalenda tearing the rose to pieces with her little teeth. He remained apparently imperturbable, still discoursing of Carmagnola and the conspiracy of Fiesco, addressing himself to the tranquil face of Caterina Spaccapietra, who pencilled rapid notes in her copy-book.

“What are you writing, Pentasuglia?” asked the teacher Friscia, who had been observing the latter for some time.

“Nothing,” replied Pentasuglia, reddening.

“Give me that scrap of paper.”

“What for? There is nothing on it.”

“Give me that scrap of paper.”

“It is not a scrap of paper,” said Minichini, audaciously, taking hold of it as if to hand it to her. “It is one, two, three, four, five, twelve useless fragments....”

To save her schoolfellow, she had torn it to shreds. There was silence in the class: they trembled for Minichini. The teacher bent her head, tightened her thin lips, and picked up her crochet again as if nothing had happened. The Professor

appeared to take no notice of the incident, as he looked through his papers, but his mind must have been inwardly disturbed. A flush of youthful curiosity made him wonder what those girls were thinking of—what they scribbled in their little notes—for whom their smiles were meant, as they looked at the plaster bust of the King—what they thought when they drew the tricolor scarves round their waists. But the ghastly face and false grey eyes of Cherubina Friscia, the governess, frightened him.

“Avigliana, say the lesson.”

The girl rose and began rapidly to speak of the Viscontis, like a well-trained parrot. When asked to give a few historical comments, she made no reply; she had not understood her own words.

“Minichini, say the lesson.”

“Professor, I don’t know it.”

“And why?”

“Yesterday was Sunday, and we went out, so I could not study.”

The Professor made a note in the register; the young lady shrugged her shoulders.

“Casacalenda?”

This one made no answer. She was gazing with intense earnestness at her white hands, hands that looked as if they were modelled in wax.

“Casacalenda, will you say the lesson?”

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