

Vitaliano Brancati

Beautiful Antonio

Translation by Tim Parks

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I

OF THE BACHELOR SICILIANS who settled in Rome around the year 1930, eight at the very least, if memory serves aright, rented furnished flats in quiet, out-of-the-way parts of town, and almost all of them by chance in the neighbourhood of famous monuments; of which, however, they never learnt the history or lit upon the beauty, and often they never so much as noticed them. But then, what ever *did* fail to escape the notice of eyes straining to catch a glimpse of the woman they lusted after among the scrum of passengers alighting from a tram? Domes, portals, monumental fountains. . . Works which, before they were achieved and accomplished, had for years furrowed the brows of Michelangelo and Borromini, could not for a moment catch the attention of the black, roving eyes of these guests from the South. Age-old bells with their mellow, solemn voices, celebrated in the lines of Goethe and of Shelley, earned themselves a "*Chi camurria, 'sta campana!* Damn those bells!" for vibrating with their dawn chorus through the wall against which the young man was resting a brow but recently surrendered to sleep and still red with the imprint of a pair of lips.

The respect which as a chronicler I owe to truth impels me to own that these Sicilian bachelors were not much of an eyeful; except for one, Antonio Magnano, who was an Adonis. In saying this I should not like you to imagine the ugly ones were unattractive to women. On the contrary many of them, despite being of bantam size, with Semitic noses and little-finger nails left long to pick their lugholes clean, appeared to be linked by some deep complicity to the whole of the female race. You

might think that between them and all the women under the sun a disgraceful act had somewhere and at some time taken place. There was not a woman but on first setting eyes on these men seemed to pale and to acknowledge herself bound to them by long-standing and unspeakable moral lapses. Hence their conquests always had a shabby air of blackmail, although (and this I can swear to) these fellows of twenty-five to thirty were of a peerless tenderness and courtesy towards the opposite sex. But upon this earth, for all its mysteries, there is perhaps no more mysterious being than your truly ugly man.

Of quite different stamp were the triumphs of Antonio Magnano. Back in 1932 he was twenty-six years of age, and photographs of him on show in Piazza di Spagna would halt even middle-aged women in their tracks, though laden with shopping and dragging along toddlers in floods of tears with the very hand just used to box their ears. Instant bewitchment streamed from his olive-skinned visage, powerfully blue-tinted on the chin but of extreme sensitivity; the eyes seemed to glint with tears that sat on the uppermost curve of the cheeks, where the shadow of his long lashes would oftentimes abide. In his reticent presence the most jittery, hysterical woman could be seized by one of those yawning fits that discharge nervous tension, prompting her to rise from her chair and stretch out on the sofa, to rise from the sofa and stretch out on the bed. A jaundiced and superficial observer might have consoled himself by saying that women were bored in Antonio's company. What a gross error! Women felt dominated and at the same time perfectly and completely at their ease. When in his presence they sweetly burned, and suffered agonies, and went mad with a pleasure so intense as to make them think themselves possessed by some severe aberration which jumbled up pleasure and pain in that utter lack of discrimination which is the sole state of mind wherein anyone dares to be overheard pronouncing the words "I am happy!"

Antonio's ugly friends looked up to him, and would have envied him too, or perhaps even hated him, had they not

(inspired and influenced by the women they knew) unwittingly fallen in love with him themselves. The secret of those conquests so different from their own, and in fact the exact opposite – since their successes with women seemed wrung from the latter as a result of dirty doings, whereas Antonio's appeared to emanate from some mysterious balm which he conferred on his victims – the secret of those conquests, I say, so greatly intrigued them that they would set the alarm for five to be up and out early, and catch Antonio in the shower. Here they were in for a bitter harvest. Faced with those athlete's limbs tempered by a touch of mild and melancholy pallor, as if, whatever the circumstances, that body were invested by some mystic light, his friends – and first and foremost Luigi d'Agata and Carlo Fischetti – would be assailed by a malaise that cloaked self-loathing. "You know what you look like?" they would ask, to come straight out with a catch-phrase that might otherwise have festered in their bosoms and turned to spite: "Like a fresh-baked biscuit!"

And they would start to thump his bare shoulders, tweak the hairs on his chest, grab him by an ankle and hoist up a foot. . . but only to find themselves possessed and disconcerted by the vibrations of a body so infinitely strange and undeniably superior in quality.

It has to be admitted that Antonio had provoked similar perturbations from his youth up. It was on April 5th 1922 that his mother and father, Signora Rosaria and Signor Alfio, were compelled to take note of the fact. That was the morning on which the maidservant, a country girl, entered their bedroom with her face all scratched and tear-stained.

"In pity's name, what have you done?" cried the good lady, removing the tray from the girl's trembling hands. "What's been going on? Speak up!"

The poor girl sank her chin on her chest and looked asquint like a goat. Eventually she said, "It wasn't me."

"Then who was it?" demanded the mistress of the house, more flustered than ever.

“If your son’s intentions are not honourable,” he said, “he will always find a way of making trouble for women.” Clearly Padre Giovanni had no intention of admitting that Antonio was completely blameless.

“But could these women not be urged to...?”

“To...?” snapped the priest.

“To behave more decorously towards him!”

“Can you even imagine all the women whose acquaintance your son will make? Will God every time be able to send an angel to warn you that your son is... is... Well I might as well say it: coming over all randy?”

“So what must I do?”

The priest was well aware that with regard to Antonio he harboured sentiments not immaculately Christian; but alas, once embarked upon the slippery slope of wrath he was unable to resist the delectable sensation that opens a yawning chasm beneath the feet, and that drags inexorably down.

“What you must do,” he informed the mother, “is pray to God that He may soon take your son to His bosom.”

The good lady nearly fainted away with horror, and the painted wooden angel on whose plinth she had leant her head began to wobble with her sobs.

“When I am preaching my sermons,” said the priest, “and your son is there at the back of the church, the women are always putting cricks in their necks to look at him. It’s a scandal!”

It is perfectly true that Antonio, seated by the first column in the nave, had only to shift his chair or clear his throat for the pulpit to be robbed of the attentions of all the finest eyes in the place.

“Death,” continued the priest, “is for the true Christian no misfortune: rather, when it harvests us in the flower of youth, it is a gift of heaven. But it is not in our province to make suggestions to God as to the best way of placing a young man such as Antonio in the position of sinning no more and...” – he raised his voice and added – “of not inciting others to sin.

"It's your son!" whimpered the girl.

"Antonio?" bawled his father, extracting from the bed two legs which by dint of wriggling under the bedclothes he had managed to sheathe in longjohns. "Right! I'll soon settle *his* hash!"

There ensued a moment's silence. The girl then flung herself on the floor and began writhing and foaming at the mouth, seizing Signor Alfio by the legs as if to deter him from some crime. Just then in came Antonio with an air so sweet and innocent that you could scarcely credit it. The girl at once released her hold on Signor Alfio's legs, rolled across the floor and grabbed the ankles of Antonio, who appeared genuinely astonished, looking questions at his parents: what on earth was all the fuss about? The girl in the meantime pressed her face to Antonio's feet; subsequent, however (and this detail particularly struck his parents, offending them and practically sending them into fits), to tearing off and hurling away his slippers so as to weep and rub her cheeks and nose upon the naked skin.

"Forgive me!" she cried. "I'm a liar, a filthy liar!"

It was with great difficulty that Signor Alfio prized Antonio from the clutches of that twenty-year-old, her chin by now entrenched in the hollow of his shoulder.

Once alone with the girl, Antonio's mother at last learnt the truth. For five nights now this simple country lass had left her bed and gone to rend her bosom and her cheeks outside Antonio's door, caught betwixt her craving to open it and her reluctance to commit a base act.

"What's set me all on fire, what's making me burn?" whimpered the girl as she gnawed at her knuckles.

The good woman was much affected by this piteous tale, and repaired at once to her confessor at the church of Our Lady in Via Sant'Euplio. She told him the circumstances and, on the verge of tears, "Padre Giovanni," she cried, "would it not be wiser to take on a serving-lad and send the girl home?"

The old priest tapped twice with his fingertips on the lid of his snuff-box and peeked out of the confessional.