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# The Bishop's Bedroom

Translated from the Italian by Jill Foulston

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# Chapter I

In the late afternoon of a summer's day in 1946, I arrived at the port of Oggebbio on Lake Maggiore at the helm of a large sailboat. The *inverna* is a wind that rises from the Lombardy Plain every day during good weather and blows the entire length of the lake. Between noon and six o' clock it hadn't driven me any farther than that small lakeside village, so I decided to spend the night.

On board alone—as ever, it seemed—I struggled for half an hour to moor the boat in a good position, cover the sails and prepare the berth for the night. All this under the eyes of a middle-aged man who from the moment I'd cast the anchor into the mud of the marina had turned the spectacle of my arrival into his entertainment. At the time, it was fairly common to find vacationers or bored villa owners hanging about in our ports. For them, the arrival of an unknown craft, whether rowboat or dredger, was enough to dispel the melancholy of their stay on a lake. They might have come seeking pleasure and relaxation, but they ended up dealing with all manner of hassle if they were property owners, or being ripped off by hoteliers if they were just tourists. Toward evening, all of them found themselves longing for the seaside, where they could have gone around between the bunkers and recently dismantled blockhouses gorging on naked women, fried fish, dances and films.

Leaning against the iron bar of the railing like a ship's captain, the man watching me from above the quay didn't actually fit any of those categories of lakeside malcontents, who realize too late that they've made the wrong choice. He had the air of someone with a fondness for the place, and he was enjoying the silence around him. The little houses along the shore, the restaurant, the tobacconist's and the sailing shop—always closed—were so devoid of life, movement of people or goods, they looked as if they'd been painted on canvas.

Behind the houses a wall of laurel, magnolias, pines, acacias, camphor, and a bit farther up, chestnuts and oaks hung over the water where I was busying myself, turning it green and dark like the bottom of a pond.

Still under the calm and watchful eye of that landlubber standing against the railing, I pulled the waterproof tarpaulin over the boat, covering it for the night. Then I pulled hard on the mooring rope to align the stern with the quayside. I let go of the rope and with one leap, I was on land.

When I got to the top of the granite stairway that led to the pier, I found myself so close to the sole witness to my arrival that it was natural for us to greet each other with a nod and a quiet "Good evening," the way you do out of courtesy and good manners with people you don't know in the mountains, at sea or on the water, at any rate, when you're traveling and you meet other travelers.

I was already headed toward the Ristorante Vittoria when I heard the question: "Excuse me, may I ask you something?"

I turned. "Of course," I replied.

Without the least sign of flippancy, the man inquired, "What sort of boat do you have? Is it a brig, a barquentine, a sloop or a schooner?"

It wasn't the first time I'd been asked something like that in these lakeside ports. My boat actually had the solid appearance of a whaler or a bragozzo, and couldn't be categorized in the recognized tonnage.

"It's a yacht with a jib and a square-top mainsail," I replied. "It was designed and built before the war by the engineer Vittorio Quaglino, from Intra. He conceived it for sea-fishing and hoped to build a series. It's not pretty, but it's roomy, comfortable and easy to manage—to the extent that I can control it on my own. It has a little kitchen and two couchettes inside."

Not entirely satisfied, this respectable but curious fellow then asked why my boat was called *Tinca*; he'd read it on the transom.

"Maybe because it's squat and potbellied like the tench fish," I answered. "And it's the name Quaglino gave it. It's not to my taste, but I'm used to it. I could have thought of a better one—I'd have liked *Tortuga*, but changing the name of a boat or ship seems to bring bad luck."

"You don't fish?" he asked again. He positioned himself between me and the village.

"No, I don't. I follow the wind around the lake. At night, I stop in one of these little ports, take a short walk, go and eat in a hotel. Then I come back to the boat and sleep below deck—or if it's hot, on deck, protected by the canvas."

"What a life!" he remarked. By now more interested in me than in my boat, he offered me a drink in a cafe in front of us, a local serving sodas and ice cream, and selling punches or perhaps a little grappa during the winter when a few travelers wait there, chilled, for the morning boats to arrive or depart.

He made as if to sit down on one of the straw chairs outside the cafe, and introduced himself: "Orimbelli."

I, too, said my surname in a hurry. And then I sat beside him in front of the lake, which was now in shadow. We were like two old acquaintances from the village who spend the dinner hour in company with little to say, simply watching the world go by together.

"Your health," he said, raising his *aperitivo*.

"And yours." I looked at him. He drank with his eyes on the glass and his face intent, like a priest after the offertory. He was about forty, rather small, sturdy, with a large neck. His short, pear-shaped head was covered with a growth of dark, thinning hair brushed carefully to spread it out. He looked Japanese, or Mongolian; the corners of his almond-shaped eyes turned down. They were an indefinable color, and different from each other in expression, so that it seemed as if he was squinting even when he wasn't. He smiled often, sometimes for no reason, as if to seem obliging, but with the world-weariness of a gentleman, or a man who's lived a lot. His voice was somewhat nasal and yet not the least bit affected. He wore a gold ring on his little finger, and a fancy wristwatch, the kind that tells the day and month as well as the hour.

It was immediately obvious that he was someone of a certain refinement, but it wasn't easy to pin down his class. Clearly, he wasn't a businessman or industrialist. Perhaps a doctor, a notary, or just a rich idler who had established himself by the lake before the war, someone who'd only stuck his head out after the army had gone by, to see which way the wind was blowing.

To satisfy my curiosity, which was growing faster than his, I started talking a bit more about my boat and myself, in the hope that he'd exchange some of his own confidences.

"The boat's good," I continued, "for getting around, going from port to port. I stop off at the islands, get out sometimes at the Castelli di Cannero. I dock under the cliff at Santa Caterina or in old, abandoned ports such as Sasso Carmine or Gabella di Maccagno. Every now and then I go back to my home port at Luino, where I have a house."

He listened, but he clearly didn't know the lake that well, since the names of these places didn't mean much to him.

I started up again. "I go here and there to pass the time, occasionally with a girl or a friend. I came back here a year ago from Switzerland. I was interned there from '43 to '45."

"Me, too," he interrupted. "I got back a year ago from the war. Or should I say, the place I ended up in on account of the war."

I realized I'd finally triggered something in him. Pretty soon I'd know everything there was to know about him.

"I've come back from Puglia," he said, "or rather Naples, where I was waiting for north Italy to be liberated so I could return to my wife's family in Milan. I parted from them in '36 when I left for the campaign in Ethiopia. I never imagined things would last so long."

"But in October of '36 the war in Africa was already over," I observed.

"Of course it was," he replied. "But I had to stay. I was detained. In '41, I came back to Italy so as not to end up a prisoner of the English. I stayed in Naples to improve my health. I'd gotten an amoeba in Africa. A Puglian official I knew at the military hospital invited me to stay with him. A day goes by, then a month—you know how life is—what with one thing and another, the Allies landed. I had to wait. I went back to Naples, where I got into business in order to make a living, and after that I stayed for a while in Rome. Finally last year, after the liberation, I came back to Milan. My wife had been evacuated here to our villa. I rejoined her, and I've been here on the lake for

about a year now. We don't have children, and we get a bit bored. It's possible we'll go back to Milan for the winter."

He'd recounted half his life story to me without my getting a handle on him. There was the fact of his having been living away from his wife, perhaps not totally involuntarily. I dismissed the idea of his being an adventurer, a globe-trotter or a chancer—he had the air of being a serious person, grounded and reflective. What's more, he had a villa, one of the ones that overlook the lake from the promontories nearby, where he surely lived on independent means, like the lord he seemed the moment I spotted him as I entered the port.

"Are you dining at the Vittoria this evening?" he asked me.

"Yes," I said. "I know Cavallini, who runs the place. I came here in '42 before decamping to Switzerland. It was one of the few places that managed to put on a real spread despite the war and the risk of prison."

"Was life hard here in those years?" he asked.

"Hard for those who didn't know how to work around things. But with a bit of effort you could find anything. The butchers killed calves in the woods and at night the bakers made rolls and small baguettes with white flour. You could get coffee, too. I think butter and rice were exported over the mountains to Switzerland—contraband stuff, since they had rationing there as well. You had to turn a blind eye to the prices, that's for sure!"

"Well, tough times," he concluded.

"Tough times," I agreed.

"But how was it as an internee in Switzerland?" he began again.

"Depended. Those with money had a certain freedom and did all right. But those without it went to labor camps. If they weren't able to work, they went to nursing homes, which were like asylums, but had the basics."

"Listen," he interrupted me, convinced I'd been one of those with money in Switzerland, "might I have the pleasure of inviting you to dine with me at the villa? You won't eat as you would

at Cavallini's, but we can chat a bit. It happens so rarely in this village! I'll just run up to let the staff know—and my wife, of course."

He didn't even give me time to make polite noises, but got up and went toward the villa. He walked quickly but calmly, his trousers a bit loose at the back as if they'd been cut badly or made before he went to Ethiopia, and after ten years were now too large. I wondered if he were not a former career officer, one of those colonels who, once discharged, don't wear civilian clothes very well anymore.

Ten minutes later he was back. Whatever difficulties he might have had, he'd emerged victorious from the battle with his wife or staff, because he invited me to follow him.

The villa was a few minutes from the road, concealed within lush gardens. On one of the pillars of the gate I read the words VILLA CLEOFE written in black.

He took me around the grounds before introducing me to his wife. I noticed that the estate had a harbor with a small dock to the side. I stopped to study the layout and size it up. Orimbelli must have understood the reason for my interest. As if responding to a request I hadn't dared to make, he said, "Of course, if you pass by here and want to dock your boat, please go ahead. It's empty."

At last he let me cross the threshold. The door, under a glass roof with a border of lacy, perforated metal, faced the road. Inside, the hallway was hung with prints, and three doors led off to right and to left. At the end was the first flight of stairs, with a red carpet-runner such as you'd see in a hotel. Between the banister and the wall, in shadows barely touched by the light coming through a blue and red glass panel, you could make out a bronze statue on a pedestal of black marble: a shepherdess with a basket over her arm.

Orimbelli opened the first door on the right and led me into the drawing room, which was almost dark. Seated on a sofa in the dim light coming from the garden were two women.

"My wife," he said, indicating the first one.

I bowed deeply.

He then indicated the second, much younger than the first. “My sister-in-law, Matilde Scrosati, widow of the late Berlusconi.”

I bowed no less deeply, acknowledging her widowhood. It must have been recent since she was wearing a black chiffon dress.

“As I told you, this man owns a fine cutter that arrived in port only an hour ago,” Orimbelli explained to the women.

They nodded with faint smiles.

“He’s a sportsman. A sailor who tours the lake on his own for pleasure.”

“From Milan?” asked Signora Orimbelli.

“No,” I replied, “I’m from the lake area, or at least I was born here … ”

The conversation didn’t appear to be taking off. Fortunately the door opened, and a housekeeper in a white apron appeared. Dinner was served. Behind the maid, you could see that the table had been prepared in the dining room.

All the lights were on even though it wasn’t yet evening, so I could observe the two women at table while the old maid slowly served us. A fine risotto came first, then a mixed grill, followed by salad, cheese, fruit and coffee. Orimbelli served wine to me and to himself; the women drank water.

Across from me, Signora Ormibelli was very thin, schoolmarmish and snooty. She was at least ten years older than her husband, with a dry, creased face and graying hair parted down the middle. Her body was straight and neat like a man’s. Between bites, she silently watched first me and then her husband, trying to work out why he’d brought me to the house, perhaps suspecting that we were up to something—that the casual meeting at the port was just a pretext concocted by her husband for offering shelter to one of his unsavory companions from Africa or Naples.

For her part, the sister-in-law, widow of the signora’s brother, seemed pleased to have company at table. She was young, voluptuous, pale and blond, with huge, innocent eyes. She seemed a little flabby but she held herself well, and two formidable breasts protruded from beneath

the chiffon veil that enveloped her. An ill-fitting bra squeezed them into melons, but without it they'd surely have been more pendulous, like pears. Whenever she straightened up to drink or take a breath, they got in her way.

*A magnolia flower,* I thought. A lush, delicate tuberose, with who knows what hidden roots. A bit listless, maybe, with a bittersweet mouth and a cowed gaze, probably the result of dreaminess or else faux timidity. After the cruel and premature loss of the only man who'd ever touched her, someone who was irreplaceable, other men must have seemed like enemies. Hidden behind mourning veils and squeezed into invisible lingerie, she sat next to her sister-in-law like a daughter, her attitude respectful and secure. It was perfectly clear that as long as she was next to the scowling, upright Signora Cleofe, her beauty would, unfortunately, never get her into trouble.

Orimbelli didn't even bother to glance at her. When he did speak of her, nodding toward her without looking over, both out of respect for a guest and in an attempt to make amends for the women's ungracious silence, it was to tell me that Signora Matilde could be considered a war widow. Her husband had disappeared during the battle of Lake Ascianghi. "Disappeared" was a polite euphemism used to indicate "unrecovered" or "unrecognized," just as so many others who'd been hit by grenades or artillery bullets.

The widow ate quietly, as if her brother-in-law were talking about things that didn't concern her—or things she'd already heard too often. Now and again she looked at her sister-in-law beside her, who actually seemed angered by the discussion. Only toward the end of lunch did she glance at me to ask, "Coffee?"

During coffee, which was served by a young woman who hadn't appeared before, Signora Orimbelli spoke—revealing yellowed teeth—in order to complete or correct some of the information her husband thought he'd given me.

"Yes," she said, her neck stiffening like a turkey's, "we spent ten years on our own, from '41 in Milan and then the last five years here in this villa. It was my father's; it's now mine. This man here was away, in Puglia, Naples and who knows where else. My brother Angelo, poor thing,

never came back—he disappeared down there, or died. Nothing was ever known about it. If he were still of this world, he'd have shown up by now."

Orimbelli kept silent. He lit a cigar and smoked it silently, his gaze wandering between the ceiling and the table.

I deemed it the right moment to take my leave. Orimbelli wanted to go with me as far as the port but I wouldn't let him. Promising to return soon, I followed the main road. At the time, few cars used it, especially at night.

The *Tinca* was waiting for me, unmoving, in the still waters of the harbor. I slipped under the canvas without even lighting the kerosene lamp, and five minutes later I was asleep.

The next day I hoisted the sails before eight. I glided past the Villa Cleofe on my way to the open water, and noticed that all the windows on the lake side were still shut.

Who knows how often I'd sailed past that villa in my boat without noticing it, just as I'd gone past so many others, both large and small, surrounded by grounds that overlooked the lake on one shore or the other? Grand old houses, their gardens lush with greenery, their docks covered in wisteria or woodbine. All of them facing the lake, most of them shut up, silent. *Think of all those love affairs*, I mused, *everything that goes on behind those stately facades*. And I tacked, in order to catch the first breath of the *tramontana*, the cold north wind coming off the promontory at Cannero.