

# IL GIOCO DI SANTA OCA

(The Game of the Holy Goose)

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Extract translated by Katherine Gregor

Friday 20th September 1652

Saint Candida, full moon

Lucretio Firetto, First Chancellor

Busto Grande, Lombardy

The banner of Holy Office, which occupies its own rooms in the Chancery of this small town, is fluttering over the tower. The courtyard is bustling with people. Clinging to the surrounding walls, like swallows to their nests, scribes sit hunched over their own individual tables, with a stack of paper, an inkwell and a pouch of sand for drying the ink, busy drafting petitions, briefs and pleas on behalf of the unlettered.

Lucretio Firetto watches the crowd of petitioners through a Chancery window. There are more than are customary this morning, all come to voice outrage at the thieving soldiers stationed in the town, request exemption from taxes by alleging penury, and ask for help, complaining about the most diverse misfortunes.

These pests will not get it into their skulls that it's no use insisting. By now even the most dim-witted of them should know that the coffers of Busto Grande are empty, as are those of the Duchy of Milan. War engagements have exhausted all the money. After all, if even the King of Spain, our sovereign, who they say runs his household with even more wisdom than great Solomon, has suffered bankruptcy three times, then what can we expect from the much less powerful Duke of Milan? As a matter of fact, Lucretio Firetto, First

Chancellor in this accursed town that grew from the moorland, often wonders how it can be that, as they say, cartloads of gold and silver drive into the *Casa de la Moneda* in the Spanish capital, only to vanish immediately afterwards as though by magic.

Tucked into a black woollen coat, the First Chancellor, pale and puny with the pointed face of a rat, has a feeble manner, something akin to a slippery worm, and is constantly shut in his room, perusing endless papers. The Dean of the Canons at San Giovanni has once again invited him to join him for lunch, brought to him by his servant Mariana, but Lucretio Firetto has, as usual, politely declined, claiming a stomach ache, although the true reason is that he is so tight-fisted he deems spending money on gluttony the worst of all vices.

The First Chancellor eats very little, in truth, but just pecks: two spoonfuls of beans and a boiled onion, then, in the evening, some bread softened in broth, and on Sundays a risotto with the leftover scum. And never wine, only water. It is as though his daily sustenance comes from paper dust and carbon-black ink.

Dean Jermino, on the other hand, has treated himself to a stew of kid legs marinated in wine and bay leaves, with a spicy sauce made of garlic, egg yolk and Spanish fly powder. "It's an unbeatable remedy," he explained to the skinny chancellor, "against impotence of all kinds... *coeundi, erigendi* and *generandi*," then commenting at length, with a chuckle, on the powerful effects of the concoction. According to him, it endows a man to satisfy a female as many as twenty times in one day.

This afternoon, with this purpose in mind and still chewing one last mouthful, the Dean went back up to his apartment above the Chancery, not even attempting to conceal his slobbering urge but, on the contrary, with particular relish, since it's the feast of Saint Candida. So you can be certain that he's now in his shirt, mounting the servant Mariana, a forty year-old with an arse at least six hand breaths wide and large, firm breasts: too tempting a morsel for the toothless mouth of a three-score and some fool.

If he listens carefully, the First Chancellor can hear the bed creaking, though not for long. Any moment now, he'll wager Giovan Battista Jermino is going to come back down, dissatisfied and oily with sweat like a herring. He'll sit on his high-backed chair with a grim expression, and a belch will inform Lucretio Firetto that the effect of the potent sauce has, like on other occasions, got stuck in the digestive system and not dared to progress to the venereal. And so the First Chancellor will have to resign himself to hear the Dean's lamentations – about how he's short of breath and feels the undertakers drawing nigh – until the evening. " Alas, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak."

Lucretio Firetto sniggers to himself. He wonders how much money the servant Mariana gets away with filching from the stupid old man. He, Lucretio Firetto, would never behave like such a dimwit. It's true that his obsession with saving means there's not much about life he does enjoy, but he perseveres because he's set his mind on a wonderful dream. Indeed, he lives in a small room next to the Chancery, keeps no horse and darns his own clothes when they get threadbare. But meanwhile, under a particular stone slab behind his tiny bed, he keeps hidden four pouches bursting with *filippi* and silver ducats and even a few gold *doppie*. After all, so many petitioners come to him and Lucretio Firetto is very clever at making them understand that it takes the appropriate hand to put a letter on the judge's desk much more swiftly, "And ensure that the waters of justice might flow from one office to the next more freely and bypass all the other petitions, supplications and a thousand enquiries that slow down and obstruct the channels of the law." That is how he gets them to cough up. And, once he has filled a dozen or so of these pouches, he will be able to retire to the small estate his ancestors bequeathed him by Lake Varese: there he will buy himself a man servant and a wench who will cook him substantial lunches by day and give pleasures to his cock by night.

Of course, he, too, has some urges, damn it, but only seldom goes searching for a cunt or an arse, because whores cost, which is why he employs them only once a month. Better throw as little money as possible on a moment's pleasure, at least for now, while waiting for a life of comfort like that a plaster statue pope, something he is sure to have someday. Whenever his cock does itch, he resorts to the ancient art of Onan and rubs it with his right hand on weekdays, and with his left on Sundays and holy days of obligation to increase the sinful delight. He collects the semen in a pot to which he sometimes adds marinated garlic paste. It reeks like hell but he's been told for sure that it's an ointment that keeps away the pox, which he might well catch once he has a man servant and a wench at his beck and call every night. That's not counting what he imagines the women in the neighbourhood will do. They might come and ask him, if you please, to write a letter or copy a prayer or else "if your Lordship could possibly give me a little salt as I've run out, especially as my husband has gone to market in Varese and will stay there till tomorrow"...

He yawns. The moon's been full these three nights so he's had trouble sleeping. He stoops over a letter of complaint from a soldier who was ripped off at an inn, yesterday. A real babe. Anybody who sits down at a gambling table deserves no pity, the Chancellor thinks: even a child knows that when you walk into certain inns with your purse full, you leave stripped-naked as the day you were born, without even a *sesìno* left to buy a branch from which to hang yourself.

The second letter comes from the parish priest of Malnisciola: he reports receiving a visit from a certain *Manfré*, also known as the Piedmontese, thirty-four years of age, from a respectable family of merchants that suffered ruin, a man of some learning. Led astray by keeping bad company, he joined the wicked band of Bonaventura Mangiaterra, who lords over our common lands and commits many crimes as a smuggler and a braggart. But the said *Manfrè* is repentant and determined to leave that devilish band.

*I have already written in my previous missives to the secular court and the Holy Office about the danger carried by the presence of this brigand on this wicked land: after all he is a trouble maker who has a hold over the hearts of peasants. He insists that the Gospel advocates the Church be poor and that there is therefore no need to give your parson his tithe...*

What a world. How will it all end? the First Chancellor thinks, shaking his head with disapproval. If a peasant did not bestow alms, how would he save his soul and earn a place in Heaven? There are ghastly times ahead: this sneaky worm against the throne and the altar is now beginning to act even in our countryside.

*That Mangiaterra, a true son of Cain, has such a perverse soul that, from what the aforementioned Manfré says, he blasphemes against Providence and even goes as far as denying the fact that the world's inequalities are decreed by God's will, and preaches that that revolt is just.*

Lucretio Firetto sighs again: if everyone who suffers injustice took it out on the whole of society and rose against Providence, the world would soon turn into a mad house. It's enough to make one run wild.

*He said to me, "Rest assured, father, that I will do my utmost best to deserve your benevolence which is of great comfort to me. It raises me before my own eyes and proves to me that the Church pardons those who repent and wish to lift themselves out of a temporary error. I thank to Providence for not letting me fall victim of despondency and despair."*

*He therefore seemed sincerely sorry and willing to collaborate with the law and help capture the dangerous Mangiaterra and his band.*

We shall see. This moorland breeds outlaws and vagrants who live as they please, by a thousand tricks and far removed from the grip of the authorities. The Lord Himself had better come armed if He should decide to pay a call! Not to mention the swarm of witches capable of all sorts of spells. Alas, the little house by the Lake Varese is still such a long way away... *Bòn*, Lucretio Firetto will mention it to the Dean when he comes down shortly, after his unfortunate bacchanals with the servant Mariana: this is not only a matter for the law but for religion.

Indeed, an hour later, Giovan Battista Jermino also puts on his spectacles and hunches over the letter from the parson of Malnisciola. He mumbles and rubs his belly.

"What does Your Lordship think about this?" the First Chancellor asks, scratching his nose... For months, Bonaventura Mangiaterra has been no more than a legend, a rumour that bubbles up in the idle chatter of drunk men at the inn or else it sizzles in the midst of a curse to give it more sting: "One of these days Mangiaterra's band will come here, too, and then the tune is going to change!" He and his ragtag army of lice are not a topic of conversation among gentlemen. It is only flea-ridden beggars encrusted with filth, vagrants who walk through the spellbound moorland and bastard peasants with no father and no money who spin tales about his exploits... They say, apparently, some say, I've been told, and so forth. Never ending gossip from someone who heard it said by somebody who in turn got it from somebody else that... But try digging a little deeper and you won't find anyone who knows anything for sure, keep scratching the surface and all this chatter collapses like the cloth of an empty sack. Perhaps Bonaventura Mangiaterra is no more than one of so many wicked legends of the moorland. And for the chancery of Busto Grande, tracking down the source of such rumours has always been more arduous than unearthing all the ticks left behind by a flock of sheep.

There is a knock on the door. A messenger from Milan brings another letter from the Holy Office. The First Chancellor and the Dean exchange a glance: they are going to have to inconvenience the Provost now and brave his foul mood, triggered by the gout that's been torturing him these ten days.

This is a serious matter, Lucretio Firetto thinks while listening behind the door to the Dean reading aloud:

*My illustrious and most reverend Lord Provost of Busto Grande,*

*The Holy Tribunal of Milan is much concerned with the material and spiritual woes afflicting the people of the Duchy, especially those in the regions of common lands, given the presence of heretics among the German soldiers who stay or stage raids here. Therefore, in order not to fail in my duty, I do not wish to neglect to make you privy of a desire I harbour, and that is that you should advise your parsons and those in the surrounding area, also on my part, to keep a watchful eye on the relationship between foreign soldiers and the population, so that landlords innkeepers do not sell or give to the soldiers of any nation, meat of any kind on forbidden days, like Fridays and during Advent, except in cases of dire necessity (for example real and proper infirmity) judged as such by a physician. And if there were any innkeeper who, without appropriate licence, cooked meat for soldiers or other persons, may I insist that Your Lordship collect the relevant details and inform me without delay. The same with regard to the execrable vice of smoking the so-called "Tornabuoni herb", also known as "tobacco", a habit widespread among the aforementioned foreign soldiers: an act that is unpleasant to the eye and offensive to the nose, which produces a black stench that reminiscent of the horrible*

*smoke that drifts out of the bottomless pit of Hell. May I remind you that Pope Innocent X has confirmed the excommunication decreed by his predecessor of all those who indulge in this depravation, and therefore urge you to be vigilant and bring to the attention of our chancery any cases you may come across.*

*At the same time, do ensure that all the parsons of the surrounding area prevent vagrants from non-Catholic countries from circulating among peasants bulletins and books that promote false doctrines apt to insinuate the poison of heresy into their simple hearts. Last but not least, in the light of the alarming news concerning a band of villainous ragged rebels in the common lands against the secular laws and those of the Holy Faith, I must charge you to send me a written report on all the events that occur in your parish and the general state of mind of the people, especially among moorland peasants, with regard to the aforementioned rebellion. Your Lordship must therefore take heart and watch your parishioners' behaviour, then provide the necessary information to my apostolic visitor who is coming to Busto Grande in the second week of October, in view of a strong intervention on the part of the Holy Inquisition. Because no one is in a better position than Your Lordship to provide me with the elements necessary to this investigation, and because I have on several occasions seen your accuracy and promptness, I expect you to collaborate with the apostolic visitor when he visits Your Lordship.*

*Finally, needless to say that I urge you to keep this very delicate matter in the utmost secrecy. Whilst beseeching that our Lord may bestow grace upon you, I commend myself to your prayers.*

Standing behind the door, the First Chancellor has heard enough, so he returns to his room and leaves the Dean and Provost to their business. This really is a grave situation, Lucretio Firetto thinks. If, as the letter says, the apostolic visitor will be here in less than a month, then the flood gates will open to the whole process of the Inquisition. First, the edict of faith will be read in all the churches, complete with the questions – those damned and essential forty-nine questions – then, a week later, the edict of the anathema will be posted, and during this time, there will be a succession of reports and offerings. Many will quake, the Dean first and foremost. Because even though the letter requests the investigation of the landlords and innkeepers' deeds, the use of tobacco, and pamphlets circulated by travelling salesmen, no sooner is the apostolic visitor here than he will not content himself with those. You can wager he will stick his nose into the matter of fornication and the Dean will risk excommunication.

Giovan Battista Jermino has finished his meeting with the Provost; his face is dark when he calls Lucretio Firetto into his study. "Call that Giosafatte of yours straight away," he tells Lucretio Firetto in a haughty tone.

The First Chancellor watches as the Dean takes from the pocket of his robe a bunch of keys and opens the large safe behind his desk; then he fiddles with more than twenty bolts and padlocks – which takes a considerable amount of time –, opens a door no bigger than a cat flap, sticks a hand into it and pulls out a pouch. With fingers like the talons of a vulture, he counts ten silver coins – enough to pay Giusafatte Vulpe, "the eye and ear of the law" by trade, to discover something about that scoundrel Bonaventura Mangiaterra, to throw the apostolic visitor a nice big bone to sink his fangs into and detract his attention from the prevarications and bribing of canons, as well as the thefts and intrigues on the part of clerics... Then he closes the pouch again, puts it back into the safe and starts locking every padlock again.

A short break, mid-afternoon, for a light snack of breaded rabbit ribs with lard, a drop of rosé wine and, to finish, two aniseed biscuits. Giovan Battista Jermino says that a moderate meal at this time of day is recommended by Hippocrates and prescribed as medicinally beneficial by the School of Salerno. While munching the last aniseed biscuit, the Dean asks about the chancery's latest verdict, which forbids the whores in Busto Grande to be called Maria and obliges them to wear a yellow veil when walking the streets, as a mark of their profession. Because in recent times, it has become difficult to distinguish honest women from tarts, since nowadays even respectable women frequently speak to men who are not relatives, paint their lips and cheeks scarlet, and whiten their breasts. "And many have even told me they pluck their natural hairs!" he sighs, looking up at the ceiling. *O tempora. O mores.*

The snack has obviously put him in a good mood, the First Chancellor remarks to himself. Or maybe he thinks he has solved every problem by giving Giosafatte Vulpe the task of unearthing the hideout of that band of lice. "Do you remember that man's report, that notary from Dairago who wrote to us last month?" the Dean asks, absorbed in thought. "He said that this Bonaventura Mangiaterra leads a chaste life despite being young and handsome. He never has a woman at his side... Don't you think it strange?" Lucretio Firetto knows this is a perennial thought in the Dean's head. The motto he keeps repeating all day is "A woman's hair has more pulling power than a cartful of oxen..."

"Maybe that's what Bonaventura Mangiaterra's likes," the First Chancellor says, restraining a snigger, the way he always does whenever he mentions skirt chasers.

"It would be even more delightful to hand a sodomite to the executioner," the Dean replies, crossing his hands over his voracious belly.

October 1672

Box number four

Cloth merchants and platoons of soldiers who travel from Busto Grande to the port of Tornavento call it the Great Moorland Road. In actual fact it is no more than a sand path surrounded by a dense wood of downy oaks, elder and chestnut trees dominated by a sky full of heavy clouds. It does not cross many villages: they are all the same, with moss-covered roofs, shutters, old wells, the odd wild apple tree and cabbage patches enclosed by hedges. It is this path that Pùlvara is following during the second half of October, in the Year of the Lord 1672, seemingly without a specific aim but definitely trusting in her flair as a wayfarer. She pushes aside the leafless branches of a hawthorn and ventures through nettles that come up to her belly; to save her long skirt, that hinders her somewhat, from getting muddy, she lifts it to her knees. She pricks up her ears and listens to the life of the moorland throbbing around her: trees falling, branches rotting on the ground amid soaked leaves; the mist gives the leech and the fern the same caress, and makes no difference between the hornbeam and the briar. She sniffs the air, that smells of putrefying timber, and peers beyond the English oaks. The feeling that a hundred eyes are following her down this silent path sends a shudder through her: the hare springs into a run when it smells her; the fox crouches down in the heather; the boar stops training its offspring for a moment then, without rushing, goes deep into the heart of the forest; the kite watches her while flying high above; the nightjar is counting the sins Pùlvara carries on her back, then opens its beak as though about to snatch her soul.

Heedless of them, Pùlvara stubbornly keeps going. She once knew this familiar land's end, she travelled down and across it many times twenty years ago, which is why she senses many details of the moorland with her heart and her memory.

She stretches her back, a heavy bag weighing on her shoulders. It's a long way to the river and the days are growing shorter, so she must make speed. That's when she hears a mysterious, worrying sound in the distance. Is it a horn? It rises, like a lament, to the darkening sky.

Pùlvara's hand rushes to the gypsy knife she wears at her belt; she also clasps the knotty stick in her hand: she wasn't born yesterday and, if required, could defend herself.

For sure there is a village nearby, or a cottage at least. She had better get a story ready: having a silver tongue has always been my salvation, Pùlvara thinks. The folk in this wicked land enjoy listening to stories. They were born on moorland, so are ignorant people with no

learning, like Aristotle's *tabula rasa* on which nothing is written or painted. Folk without words. As the old story says:

*Back in the old days, when the earth was young, God was taking a stroll in His Heaven. And since He had nothing to do, He began to create the animals in the woods, the yarrow, sparrows, and willows for making baskets. As He walks, he invents lightning here, fog there: then wheels, stones and backwaters... Then He got tired, He said, "While I am working, let's make man" and got down to it there and then. But since He wanted to be generous, He made two: the Rich Man and the Poor Wretch. Companions in everything. But when they sprouted from the dust, the two looked at each other and knew something was wrong. They had two eyes, one for looking at all the world's beauty and the other for weeping. Also two ears, one for listening to beautiful songs, the other to hear orders. The same for nostrils, one for smelling the stew, the other for sensing danger. And so be it. But there was just one mouth. How could they talk and eat at the same time? So the rich man and the poor wretch go to ask God. And so the Lord decides. "To the rich man's mouth I will grant speech, since he already has plenty to eat. And to the poor wretch I will give food, so filling his plate will be his one and only thought. After all, the less poor folk speak, the better." And that is why the folk on the moorland have never been good talkers or able to stand up for themselves...*

It's always the same: the peasants gather in a circle around wayfarers who can tell a good story and hang from the lips of those who know the right words to make a story come alive and sound real. That is why Púlvara chooses her stories with care, because you can't just tell anything to anyone. And when she finishes her tale, people always give her a cup of the sharp wine this lean soil yields and beg her, "Once more". Because even though they already know the story, words only come alive when they are spoken.

The moorland seems to be holding its breath now, while the horn keeps calling. A sound in the thick of the trees. Púlvara feels in her chest a pang of anxiety, the hated companion of a walk across a moorland which, from one moment to the next, can turn into a place of spells. She turns abruptly and briefly glimpses two dark faces and eyes glistening above shaggy beards. Truth or a trick of the imagination? Blink and they've gone while the horn is sounded again. Two forest divinities and two sounds of the horn? Number four, tied to the moon cycle that rules over childhood. What does the number four remind you of, Púlvara? Your infancy in Milan, the shrill voices of your four siblings squatting on the bank of the Naviglio, watching barges entering the city, the opportunity to savour the taste of a joyfully adventurous freedom at the horse market past Porta Ticinese, or in Vico delle Oche outside San Vittùr, back in the days of once upon a time and there didn't used to be, before the scourge of the plague wiped out your family... Number four, the year of the sun in the Game of the Goose, which is so much like life itself. Step forth, Púlvara. Use your judgement

and have faith: because as the Ancients knew, the goose is the Lady of the Animals. So be guided by her.

After all, in the beginning there is always a feathered creature.