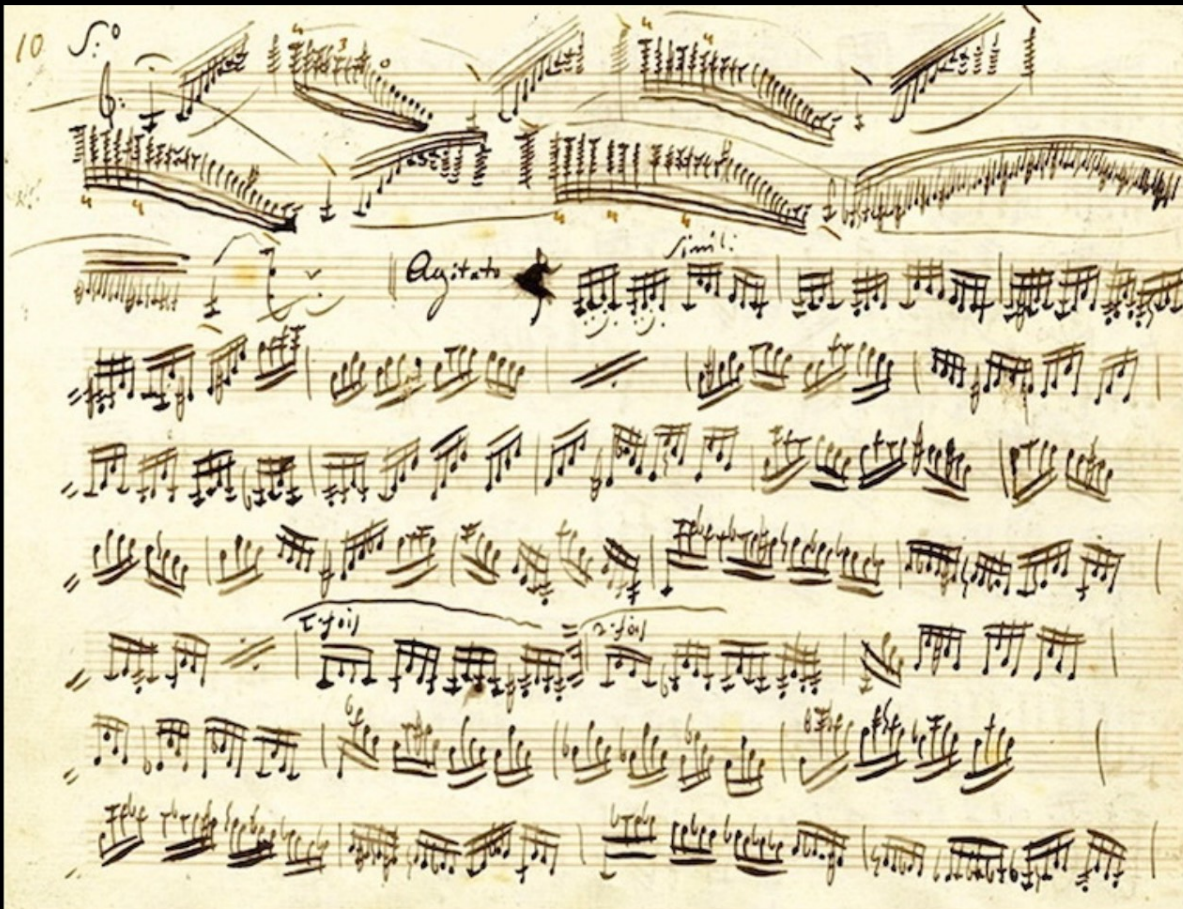


Excerpts from the
Original Manuscript

PAGANINI AGITATO



Ann Abelson

**Excerpts from the
Original Manuscript
Paganini *Agitato***

A Novel by Ann Abelson

with a Foreword by Lenny Cavallaro

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Cover image: *I Capricci per Violino*, by Niccolò Paganini, 1816

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This is a work of fiction, based on historical events and characters.

To my daughter, Maya, and son, Jacob, with the hope that they will develop a greater appreciation for the literary talent of their paternal grandmother.

About the Author

Ann Abelson (1916-92) was the author of *Angel's Metal* (Harcourt), *The Little Conquerors* (Random House), and the award-winning young adult novel, *Blimp* (Dutton). She left behind several manuscripts, including *Paganini Agitato*, *A Slow Train to Budapest*, and *Interlude in Eden*. The unfinished texts have all been edited by her son, Lenny Cavallaro, and are available through various retailers.

Lenny Cavallaro's own works include: *The Ibbur's Tale*, *The Passion of Elena Bianchi* (a four-volume series), *Sherlock Holmes and the Mysteries of the Chess World*, *Two Oedipal Plays*, *Superstition and Sabotage*, and *Trojan Dialogues*. He is also a concert pianist and composer.

Foreword

Paganini Agitato, by Ann Abelson, tells the remarkable story of Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840), the legendary violinist. A flawed character, he had a string of mistresses (including a sister of Napoleon Bonaparte!) and was once jailed for having impregnated the young daughter of a Genoese tailor. He was also addicted to gambling and lost a Stradivarius violin during a horrible evening at the poker table. But perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Paganini myth was the firm conviction held by many that he had sold his soul. How else could people explain the dazzling technique, the countless innovations he brought to violin performance, and the unearthly compositions he presented to the world?

Paganini was denied a Christian burial because of an edict by the Bishop of Nice. It required decades of legal negotiations (and vast sums in bribes) before his son, Baron Achilles Paganini, could bury his father's remains on sacred grounds.

My mother was captivated by the story and began an historical novel about the fiddler. I have "edited and revised" *Paganini Agitato*, and it was released by Fomite Press in August 2023, thirty-one years after her death. However, in preparing the book for eventual publication, I was obliged to delete portions of my mother's sprawling narrative. Some of the material seemed quite interesting, but it did not serve the central purpose of the novel, which revolved around the question of whether he had been consigned to the fires of Hell or had somehow escaped the pact he had made with the Devil.

One of the deleted sections involved his debacle in England. Ever lusting for a woman but condemned never to love one, Niccolò became interested in Charlotte Watson, the young daughter of his manager, John Watson (a rather despicable and odious character in his own right). In all likelihood, nothing actually "happened" (as far as historians can determine). However, Paganini at one point did contrive to elope with young Charlotte, whom he presumably intended to marry. Suffice it to say that

his plans were brought to the attention of the girl's father, Charlotte never reached her "Nicky," and a hellish scandal ensued.

While all this was going on, Paganini had also been trying to legitimize his son, Achilles. He concluded that a title of nobility would be the safest vehicle through which to do so, and he set about procuring both a baronetcy and his "*Delizia*," a term that translates as "delight," but by which he referred to an estate worthy of a baron.

A few characters from *Paganini Agitato* should be introduced (or reintroduced), in order that these "editor's cuts" be rendered more accessible. They include:

Gioachino Rossini—the famous operatic composer and life-long friend of Paganini.

Antonia Bianchi—a singer with whom Paganini had a tumultuous affair that resulted in the birth of his son, Achilles.

Helena—the baroness whom he seduced but ultimately abandoned. She pursued him across Europe, desperately seeking to meet with him, until she was ultimately confined to an asylum.

Achilles (also Achillino, the diminutive form of the name)—the son of Paganini and Antonia Bianchi. After two years of bitter legal haggling, Niccolò gained sole custody of the boy, and he spent many years thereafter seeking to legitimize him (so that he could inherit his father's wealth).

Luigi Germe—Paganini's closest friend and attorney, who also managed many of Paganini's investments (quite successfully).

* * *

Another interesting name appears in Chapter Two and again toward the end of Chapter Five: one that warrants a few words. The relationship and near collaboration between Hector Berlioz and Paganini is a matter of historical record. Unfortunately, they "got off on the wrong foot" with one another. The young composer felt snubbed when Niccolò did not join a benefit he was holding for his (i.e., Berlioz's) wife; the French-

man then returned the compliment by declining an invitation to attend the violinist's recital. Nevertheless, both respected the unique gifts of the other.

Shortly after these social lapses, Paganini acquired a splendid Stradivarius viola, and he was anxious to display his skills on that instrument. Alas, there was really no suitable vehicle in the repertoire, so he offered Berlioz a commission to create one.

The Paganini violin concerti offer what the fiddler had in mind: a brilliant work with virtuosic challenges that would leave the audience breathless. The composition Berlioz produced, *Harold en Italie* (*Harold in Italy*) features a prominent viola role, but it is certainly *not* a concerto. Indeed, the composer wrote in his *Memoirs*, "I wanted to make the viola a kind of melancholy dreamer in the manner of Byron's Childe-Harold."

Suffice it to say that Niccolò was immensely disappointed. He refused to attend the premiere in 1834 and did not even hear the work until four years later, at which time he knelt before Berlioz and kissed the composer's hand. Shortly thereafter (the two having quickly reconciled), he sent the composer the staggering sum of twenty thousand francs, which enabled the completion of *Roméo et Juliette*, a choral symphony. Sadly, Paganini's health deteriorated, and he never heard the work he had so generously supported.

* * *

My mother might perhaps have written more about Berlioz, but for whatever reason, she made only the slightest reference to him (cf., below). On the other hand, she wrote far more about Paganini's fantasies involving Charlotte Watson, even though they were never realized and added little to the main conflict: the Satanic pact from which he tried to extricate himself. Thus, I felt compelled to cut both of these sections completely. However, I think they are viable, and I hope this "editor's cut" will prompt interest in *Paganini Agitato*.

— Lenny Cavallaro

* * *

Paganini Agitato, by Ann Abelson, is available in paperback and digital format.

Chapter One: Stagnation in Paris

It was exactly as he had predicted. Indeed, life's courings took on a dreary familiarity, and Niccolò longed, more urgently and consistently than before, for his *Delizia* [delight]: his titled, country retreat and the serenity that would surely attend it. "Find me quickly my *Delizia*," he wrote Germi, after boasting of his Parisian successes.

He could not understand why Paris palled so quickly. Surely, he was reasonably content here, communicating with a live, vivacious people, surrounded by artist friends, earning sums so stupendous he felt obliged, out of decency, to lie about his receipts...

Thanks to Rossini and his circle, *soirées*—evening events—here were not the dull, condescending affairs arranged by the aristocracy as a means of gratifying the most hideous of its dowagers and in the hope that the eccentric fiddler might consent to perform without a fee. Niccolò played freely for other musicians. It was his particular joy to engage in skirmishes of musical wit with them. Artists might become inflamed with jealousy and appear as mean and petty as cobblers or kings, but they were not—happily—consistently so. Within their own confraternity, men and women of the theater were usually warm, outreaching, and generous to the point of prodigality.

Here Niccolò found not the occasional affined soul afloat in an alien atmosphere due to the accident of birth or the need to eat. Here thrived a shining universe, the milieu he had often thought he needed to survive, to feel at all times sentient and understood.

He became aware of this and of his lifelong isolation at a party given by Troupenes, a wealthy amateur. The incredible bass, Lablanche, whom Niccolò met for the first time and at once asked to accompany him to England, sang numerous airs, discussing them with comic abandon. "The next will be rendered in my most sacerdotal voice, as befits the subject," he would explain, while performing as dedicatedly as he might have before an audience of thousands. DeBeriot played with Gallic elegance and

true humility, insisting he was scarcely the violinist at that moment in everyone's heart and on everyone's lips. And DeBeriot's beloved, Maria Malibran, repeated her arias from Rossini's *Otello* and then declared, "I shall improvise, and Paganini will embellish."

Joyously, Paganini seized DeBeriot's violin, a thin, silvery-throated French instrument (and not quite to his taste). His variations were clever and quixotic, eliciting great astonishment. He returned the violin, laughing. "I sound as chaste as you are reputed to be," he said, referring, of course, to DeBeriot's violinism and fiddle.

"Oh, not chaste by choice," answered the other, joining in the general laughter.

Niccolò was happy, yet he was wretched. He had moved frequently in an aura of eminence, but not since early Lucca, prior to his involvement with the Bacciochi court, so spontaneously among friends. Yet out of successes and comradeship, he reaped little substantive pleasure. Ugly forebodings harassed his nights: he would become permanently ill; he would lose his money; Achillino would meet with some dire accident; the press would turn upon him; Helena would accost him with preposterous demands...The very radiance of Paris made him increasingly suspicious. When a pert little maid, offering him a good morning and his chocolate, asked in a tuneful country accent whether *Monsieur* and the child would be resting in their rooms that morning, he roared, "Why do you want to know?"—prompting her to burst into tears. Surely, goodness was not gratuitous! She must have chirped her question for some sinister "reason." It did not occur to him that the reason might be as uninteresting as her order to tidy up the bedchambers before noon whenever possible.

Gioachino noted the coils of anxiety and doubt that made Niccolò moody, withdrawn, and unresponsive. He wondered—logically, he thought—whether his friend was suffering from unrequited love, an improper affliction at so great an age. Niccolò's utter astonishment on being

confronted with a blunt, "Tell me: who is she?" convinced Rossini that he had been in error, and he quickly apologized.

"My only problem involving a woman," Paganini admitted (for it was difficult not to confide in so affectionate a friend), "is how to avoid an encounter in Paris. For if there should be one, it may well prove fatal."

"Deny everything," Rossini counseled. "Say, 'Madame, who are you?'"

But Niccolò did not have time to brood on the predatory Helena. He soon faced other problems. First, he offended the National Guard and countless Frenchmen who supported its annual charity concert by refusing to participate. He had surrendered the *Opera*, booked for him on the designated date, for the Undertaking, but his services were another matter. Even the saintly poor could not inspire him to perform at a music hall affair, where he would add his contribution to those of jugglers, tumblers, and clowns who played combs and glass jars. He explained carefully and firmly, indicating that the indigent of Paris would not be forgotten during his lucrative visit to the city. Nevertheless, the grumbling rose to a small roar, and the familiar charges of greed, avarice, parsimony, and piracy vibrated in his ears and blazed from the newspapers.

If the poor of Paris did not move him to debase his art, the plight of Italian refugees failed to move him at all. He had always been delighted to encounter the mother tongue, however garbled, in a foreign land, and the Italian musicians provided a haven of comfort and understanding. Niccolò felt a kinship with them stronger than chance or affinity, and an Italian colony provided warm, motherly women to whom Achillino might be safely entrusted. The political refugees, on the other hand, were quite another matter. Italy, ever restless, seethed with discontent; every expatriate gushed eloquent prose of unification. The *Carbonari*, quelled temporarily in the 1820 bloodletting of Naples, were everywhere burgeoning. Paris had become the prime hatchery of Italian nationalism. Naturally, funds were short; fortunes had been abandoned, and worth-

while, remunerative work proved difficult to find. Thus, the exiles now appealed to the Croesus from Genoa, requesting help in whatever form he might see fit to offer.

Niccolò did *not* see fit. He was caught in a vise of contradictory considerations. The unification of Italy, for him, seemed mainly an oratorical exercise; his feelings remained uninvolved. He had traveled a long, disillusioned road from early Jacobinism and evolved into a cosmopolite to whom the very concepts of nationality and nationhood seemed a little unreal. Since his early convictions (he now believed) had rendered the road to a papal decoration long and laborious, he feared that association at this time with the rabble rousers might block him later in other respectable pursuits.

No; he would not defy the Pope, the Bourbons, or the Austrians! He would extract what he could from them and be circumspect in his contempt. It would be inappropriate for a papal cavalier to support the *Carbonari*, mutinous enemies of his benefactors. [Of course, he felt no loyalty toward the crowned heads or the overlords of any land and knew them to be frequently petty and foolish.]

It was *Delizia* he craved, with a title: solid, permanent things. The unification of Italy, when it occurred, would form as adequate a backdrop to his efforts as had the age of the hero and the age of tiny tyrants. He would accept change when it came. General Pino had taught him, very long ago, the advantages of an uncommitted heart.

Chapter Two: Charlotte

Niccolò had strange, tidal feelings about England, in turn attracted and repelled. He was bone-weary, sick, and exhausted by his travels. He yearned only for the rich pasturage of his *Delizia*. He must end this homelessness. Even as the music cascaded from his bow, he knew himself ready to surrender to silence.

Suddenly, he understood Rossini's willingness to stop writing. Gioachino had always understood the art of indolence. "Music, too, is a vanity, my good friend," he advised. "And I am sufficiently puffed up with vanities." Moreover, underneath the badinage yawned exhaustion, the deep and terrible emptiness that trails fertility.

At almost forty-nine, he knew himself obscenely rich, disease-ridden, emotionally bankrupt, and desperate with anxiety over the future of Achillino. Not his own; he had no future. He had outlived the wildest optimism of the most optimistic of his physicians. He knew himself capable of brief spurts of regeneration and baffling strength, during which he could somehow surmount debility and pain. However, Death and he gambled in close quarters, and Niccolò could not always expect to win.

And when he lost, what would become of Achillino? Antonia, too slippery for his lawyers, had vanished. His sisters, who never ceased petitioning for help, wrote gloomily of their poverty, calamities, and struggle with the commonplaces of life that seemed, to Niccolò, the greatest of the world's terrors. As for Teresa, she had become a senile child, responding only to rewards and deprivations. No one from his natal family had ever seen Achillino, and he was sure they would pluck out the child's eyes to enhance their share of the inheritance.

Thus, it seemed there was but one way to go: to new lands, as yet unexploited. The rich must grow richer; the walls of the citadel must be rendered impregnable. *Delizia*, when it became a reality, must be more than delectable. It must stand secure against chance, circumstance, and

the crowning and toppling of kings. His son must be rendered impervious to ill winds.

He left Achillino in Paris at the home of an excellent tutor. It was time the boy learned manners and French, and that his education began in earnest, away from stupid old women and an overindulgent father. Niccolò arranged concerts in the Channel towns to defray expenses. Then he steeled himself against the hideous prospect of seasickness and set out for London, the first city of the world: the largest, richest, dirtiest, most raucous, least musical; the cradle of the soulful English milord, George Gordon Byron, and the peripatetic concertgoer, Leigh Hunt.

Even in May, London was damp and sunless, clogged with a beggar's opera of weird and curious characters. Fog contaminated the atmosphere; Niccolò at once found breathing difficult and began to cough up blood. Pain quivered in his joints, bones, eyeballs, and gums. He sent letters of introduction to Dr. Billing, the distinguished physician who served a court, and to the dentist, Dr. Cartwright, both allegedly dedicated chamber music performers who might feel flattered, hopefully, on finding themselves sought out by Paganini.

The chill diffused a low fever, wavering but persistent, and an unfamiliar aural tenderness that Niccolò attributed to the din of the city itself. Never had he seen a noisier, more squalid metropolis. He remembered Rome's antique grandeur, the spacious imperial majesty of Vienna, the beauty and intimacy of Paris. London was merely old, ugly, and twisted. It spewed up all its sores: the gaping poverty that belied its great wealth; the thieves, strumpets, and pickpockets that did a thriving business; the desperate street hawking.

Niccolò's old friend, Laporte, whose irrepressible dishonesty glittered from his little pigs' eyes, welcomed Niccolò with an exaggerated show of cordiality and affection. Yes, the fog *was* unhealthy; the air, rancid; the language, an assault; the country itself unfit for civilized Latins, he agreed. However, London—the entire isle, for that matter—abounded in lovely pounds sterling and suffered from a sense of

musical inferiority, a predicament enormously profitable for visiting Italians.

Laporte proposed the King's Theatre as the most appropriate of London's showplaces for the display of Paganini's talents. Prices, as on the Continent, could be doubled, he continued, smacking his lips. Even the celebrated Giuditta Pasta, at the helm of a costumed troupe, an orchestra, and pasteboard scenery of a sort, had not dared that!

Niccolò readily agreed. It was his practice to set a high price on his performances. Moreover, here (as everywhere) the doctors would surely reduce him to beggary. The musical dentist had had the effrontery to take an imprint of his mouth for new dentures while routinely discussing his fee, a shocking one. The compliment of an invitation to play with Paganini had pleased but not befuddled, and Dr. Cartwright would be happy, in his phlegmatic, British way, to join Niccolò for Beethoven quartets.

However, Londoners proved far from phlegmatic about the doubling of prices. Crying piracy and collusion, and calling on island patriotism, the journals burst into hysterical prose in an effort to forestall this outrage. They were successful, but not before the hail of invective had excited Niccolò to defend himself, voluntarily correct his policy, and take to bed with such fever and rage that the opening concert had to be postponed for a week.

Nevertheless, he played superbly. Despite the vituperation heaped upon him in advance, the journals rent themselves asunder concocting paeans, extravagances, and outlandish tributes. The usual eyewitness accounts of violinists shattering their instruments and pianists rendering prayers of thanksgiving that they were not fiddlers peppered the appraisals, and the imaginative Leigh Hunt heard ecstatic groans of "Oh, God!" well up from a great mass of listeners.

Alas, Niccolò was aware of only a sense of satiety. The joy of conquest had spent itself. He remembered the tale of Alexander the Great, who sat down and wept when there were no more worlds to conquer, and Paganini wept, also.

He accepted with resignation the death of Teresa Paganini. Germin's sad tidings reached him during the tour of provincial cities. He crossed himself, squeezed out a tear or two, and wrote his friend sanctimonious phrases of acknowledgement, referring to his mother's abode in Paradise, where she resided in the arms of her Savior. This much accomplished, Niccolò made his way onto the Liverpool boards and performed with great verve and dazzling fireworks. Teresa had ceased to exist.

* * *

John Watson, friend of Laporte and just as flagrant (if less successful) a rogue as he, served as Niccolò's manager, interpreter, and accompanist during the English tour. A composer of sorts, Watson was official chorus master and arranger for all Royal Theatre enterprises, supplementing his income with piano pupils and occasional music of a pedestrian sort for the London theaters. Long separated from his wife and family, who resided in Bath, Watson had acquired a stable mistress, Miss Henrietta Wells, a singer whose straight-laced, disapproving mien gave rise to puzzling questions concerning her predilection for the lyric theater and illicit love. Even Niccolò, insensitive to the domestic affairs of others, wondered whether Watson had been an idiot to desert a wife and children for this raw-boned, angular spinster.

Shortly before Niccolò's arrival in London, the Watson-Wells ménage had been joined, under somewhat equivocal circumstances, by the youngest of Watson's daughters, Charlotte. Charlotte had come to London for a career, choosing to overlook her father's indiscretions and long neglect in the hope that he might guiltily provide for her. Watson rose to the occasion, sending his daughter to a celebrated Frenchman for vocal instruction, finding her a place in a chapel choir that yielded a small stipend, and calling her charms to the attention of the jaded moneybags with whom his fortunes were to be briefly entwined. Paganini, it was rumored, had shown himself grossly appetitive for young girls. At his age

and state, Watson calculated, this addiction ought to prove lucrative to such fortunate young girls—and their fathers.

He contrived for Miss Wells and Charlotte, blending their high and low voices in innocent madrigals and sentimental ditties, to join Paganini at the midpoint of his provincial tour. Satisfied, on the whole, with Watson's services and arrangements, and appreciative of his knowledge of backstage French and Italian, Niccolò did not demur. Both ladies spoke acceptable French. Miss Wells avoided him as though he were the very Devil, while Miss Watson seemed to find him delicious, if he correctly understood her eyes and her smile.

* * *

"You breathe badly!" Niccolò interrupted the session, a surge of bliss and pain reminding him of the futile education of Antonia Bianchi. "One does not puff out the chest in inhaling. The air must encircle and fill the diaphragm, which is the source of the vocalist's strength."

"But that would make me look fat," Charlotte pouted, placing the flat of her hand upon her waist while she breathed experimentally.

"You are constricted," Niccolò continued. "Your whalebone may give you a tiny waste, but until you rid yourself of that...that medieval torture, you will never become a singer."

At sixteen, Charlotte (after the manner of the Northern female) was still emerging into full womanhood. Underneath the ruffling, her hips were straight as a boy's; her arms and legs, scarcely rotund; and the adolescent breasts, small and upright, were at best childishly budded. Compounding his satyr's excitement was Charlotte's total command of the situation. She viewed his onslaught with tutored guile and merriment, knowing exactly what she proposed to permit him for the designated trophy: little or nothing, until she had satisfied herself as to the integrity of his promises. He could afford to turn madman, to lose his head, to beg, or to howl. Charlotte, smirking gaily, remained friendly and amenable,

lavishing exquisite suggestions of what might logically follow should he prove generous...

“Hush! I believe your father has returned,” Niccolò whispered, his hand freezing upon her throat. He listened guardedly and nodded, indicating her disarray and the straggling wisps of hair.

“Oh, I don’t think Papa will mind...much,” she said.

* * *

“Did you miss me, Achillino? Oh, how you have grown! Did you miss me? Eleven months, such a long time among those savages!”

“Oh yes, Father. We talked of you every day, *Monsieur* Gueron and I, and then *Madame* Gueron would remind me to mention you in my prayers.”

“What have you been learning?”

“Oh, I am reading French and conjugating verbs, and I have learned all about Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte...and Pontius Pilate. And geography, Father: the different countries, their names and mountains—I mean like London is in England on the River Thames, and that is where you were. And I know some Catechism, too, but not too much.”

“I can see you are a very intelligent child, which pleases me. Wealth is consumed, sound perishes, but learning is an eternal light. Remember that, Achillino. Do you want to come to England with me when I return?”

“Well, I am quite fond of Paris. And there are three boys who join me each morning at *Madame* Gueron’s. Pierre Robillard is the one I like best.”

“Would you like a pretty young mother?”

“I prefer boys, about my own age. Of course, mothers aren’t girls, exactly. Oh, all right. But you promised me one before.”

“So I did. But it is difficult to find a *suitable* mother.”

“Is this one suitable?”

“I do not know, Achillino. I really don’t know.”

“I guess nothing will come of it. Nothing ever comes of anything. I forgot to tell you that *Monsieur* Gueron has a dog and a cat. The dog sleeps in my room. His name is Pompey, and if Ninette comes even near the door, he growls like a lion.”

“But you’re glad I’m back? You are happy to see me?”

“Am I going to remain at the Guerons’?”

“No, we are going to live at the *Hôtel des Princes*, you and I.”

“Again?”

“And presently, we shall be joined by two lovely ladies, Miss Wells and Miss Watson. They will sing at my concerts.”

“Always concerts...I thought we were going to live in a great house with horses.”

“Of course, of course, Achillino. Our good friend, the advocate Geremi, is seeking just such a house.”

“Really, Father, I wonder whether you are not fooling me altogether, as with the story of *La Befana*. There is no such person as the *Befana* who gives presents at Christmas time. No one has even heard of her in Paris.”

“They are good, kind ladies. I know you will like them.”

“But I like it better at *Monsieur* Gueron’s, truly I do. We have wonderful things to eat, and Pierre Robillard comes every day. I am learning a lot, too...I can name all the countries of Europe, even in the far north, and I know the ‘Our Father’ and the ‘Hail Mary’ in French, and...oh, I’ll never have a horse, I know it!”

“I have missed you sorely, Achilles. After all, what else do I have to live for? Everything is for you, for your patrimony, for your good life...There will be all I have promised and more. This is a sacred vow, as I am a father, and as I love my son.”

“Oh, dear, everybody is looking at you. Please don’t shout so. Let’s go for pastries and chocolate. *Monsieur* Gueron always does when I’m good and have studied hard.”

“You shall lead the way.”

“All right. But, Father—“

“Yes, Achillino?”

“Grown men don’t cry on the boulevard. It doesn’t look nice.”

* * *

There had as yet been no understanding that the Watsons *would* come to France, although Niccolò had sounded out the crafty father and both ladies. Miss Wells seemed indecisive, uncertain as to whether the step would prove ruinous or the making of her fortune. Charlotte’s position was more passive. Of course, she longed to see Paris and her Nicky, if he would but promise her things (and if her dear Papa consented). Dear Papa scratched his pate, seemingly amenable, though he failed to talk of time and place—or fees. He was, Charlotte confided, looking into possibilities in America, where two of his children had emigrated. In America, fortunes were being made overnight, she quoted. There was so much money and so great a hunger for music and theater that the continent had become a vast marketplace for artists who had the stomach to undertake the journey. Perhaps dear Nicky would join them?

No, he hadn’t the stomach. The dreaded Channel had been ordeal enough. Besides, America was a wild country, still peopled with savage Indians who shot poisoned arrows.

In the meantime, he occupied himself with Achillino, vowing that they would never again endure so long a separation. Why, the child had half-forgotten him, grown into a reserved, self-sufficient stranger. Then there were the forthcoming concerts, as well as the jewelers. The latter received commissions for a huge diamond ring, a less precious ring of intricate design, and a carved bracelet studded with alternating pearls and diamonds. Descriptions of these, together with itemized costs, were sent to Charlotte as bait. Niccolò knew that Watson read the letters and dictated the replies, which were invariably the same: Charlotte languished for her sweet Nicky, but had to wait dutifully for Papa to make up his mind.

Meanwhile, it was good to be back in Paris. It was even better to be done with the sluggish, warped English temperament and the bleak, ugly, unhealthful English climate. “A nation that can survive such a climate deserves respect,” General Pino had told him, long ago. “The English armies will always be invincible on foreign soil, in the hope that their conquests might be extended indefinitely. Who can blame them? Would *you* want to be sent back to England?”

Giacomo Meyerbeer and Felix Mendelssohn, coincidentally in Paris at the time of his return, called on Niccolò together and separately. Rossini, still ensconced in his eyrie atop the *Théâtre des Italiens*, welcomed him effusively, forgave him for looking “solemn as a Protestant divine,” and at once started plotting a feast in his honor. He gossiped about the new composers, befuddling Niccolò with accounts of the work of a young Frenchman, Hector Berlioz. “He is deep, volcanic,” Gioachino conceded. “But who can understand him? However, friend of my youth, perhaps it is our own knell we are hearing in these new depths: mine, at any rate.”

Friedrich Wieck and his gifted little daughter, Clara, whom Niccolò had heard during his Prussian sojourn, also found themselves in Paris, the father aggressively concerned with Clara’s artistic future and the cementing of connections. The German artists rose as one man in sponsoring the sturdy, gifted girl with the formidable pianistic technique, and she appeared in several concerts. Wieck now approached Niccolò. Perhaps Clara, he ventured in a flowery document, might be assisting artist to the peerless fiddler at some of his forthcoming Parisian recitals? Such patronage would secure the child’s reputation. Paganini, too, would benefit, reaping musical assistance of a caliber worthy of his talents as well as Clara’s undying gratitude and that of his least worthy and most obedient servant, etc.

Niccolò cogitated and delayed. The notion of sharing plaudits and comparisons with a child who was an artist of the first rank became increasingly distasteful, and the thin edge of guilt that accompanied his

distaste made it increasingly difficult to tell the patient Wieck of his decision. At last, Niccolò wrote a brief, incoherent letter vaguely indicating prior commitments. He enclosed a pair of tickets to the first of his concerts in late March, declaring that he most indelibly remembered Clara's rich gifts and looked forward to the pleasure of soon hearing her in Paris.

He might have saved himself the trouble. On the eve of the first of his ten scheduled performances, the terror-stricken Wieck and his wonder-child fled the city, preceded by many others, including a scared and unphilosophical Rossini. Many of the original subscribers hysterically jammed the theater demanding their money back or trying to sell their tickets to more intrepid concertgoers before joining the exodus.

Paris was being quietly besieged by a lethal, invisible enemy. Trailing Niccolò from London, where it had reached near-epidemic proportions, the Asiatic cholera had begun to gnaw furtively upon its first victims.

"Pierre Robillard has gone to stay with his grandmama in Rims," Achillino reported mournfully. "Are we going away, too, Father, so the pest cannot harm us?"

"No," Niccolò replied. "I returned to Paris to give ten concerts, and that is what I propose to do. As for the pest...Listen carefully, my child. It cannot harm us."

However, the second concert, early in April, had to be postponed due to an attack of the familiar symptoms, including the colitis that now recurrently troubled him.

* * *

He knew he had chosen an unstrategic time to return to England. Curiosity and appetite had scarcely been revived; the unpleasant repercussions attendant upon the "piracy" charges had not yet been forgotten, and London, too, was in the throes of the Asiatic pestilence. However, both Laporte and Watson, his managerial guardians, had sustained great losses and now faced the threats of debtors' prison, a medieval British institution devised to salve the wounds of outraged creditors.

Niccolò had not planned to return until perhaps the following year. Pressing matters should have kept him in Paris. The legitimization of Achilles, alas, had remained a good intention. He was negotiating for a title; a sum had to be agreed upon and certain technicalities surmounted before he could become a Westphalian baron. He had written little, save the sonata for viola, although the musical ferment unleashed in Paris moved him to reevaluate himself as a composer: sometimes with indignation; often with morbidity and an acknowledgement of sagging powers. The ideological arrogance of the new composers, their inflated sense of uniqueness at the discovery of the obvious—“Eureka!” Rossini had cried. “We breathe through our noses!”—their lofty damnation of the past: these things infuriated Niccolò and made him want to prove himself an old master in their territory. However, the creative well *was* running dry, and he could only rail.

What, then, prompted his return to England under such inauspicious circumstances? Charlotte, of course, and the nightmares of death, impotence, and humiliation, to say nothing of the submerged fear that she might indeed be removed to America, perhaps forever. He pined for joy and Charlotte; it was as simple as that.

* * *

On his return to London, he rented a tiny house overlooking Regent Park, engaging a slatternly Italian woman to supervise the cuisine and the cleaning. Charlotte came often and accepted the lavish gifts (which he doled out one at a time) with noisy glee. Surprisingly, she proved a delightful playmate to Achillino. “Oh, he is adorable. He’s better than a dirty old man like you deserves,” she squealed.

Niccolò suspected strategy; he was by nature suspicious. Charlotte, he discerned, wished to bait him through the boy (possibly upon the advice of her father). By her befriending of Achillino, the advantages of a warm, maternal person about the house might be brought home to Nic-

colò. And who could prophecy? Perhaps the aging satyr might yet be domesticated.

Niccolò smiled. Perhaps, perhaps...Domestication held fewer terrors as he grew older, and occasionally a genuine advantage loomed.

He watched Charlotte and Achilles on the floor, a chessboard between them. The boy was trying to explain the intricacies of the game to the pretty young woman, who pouted and pretended, but could not concentrate hard enough to remember.

"Oh, dear! Your Charlotte is such a daft one," she conceded. "I can only remember that the Queen flies through the air with the greatest of ease. Your silly Bishops and Rooks and Knights? I can't even tell them apart. I don't think chess is a game for girls."

"Maybe not," Achillino agreed. "They are not too smart. Though *Madame Gueron* plays better than I, and even better than Pierre Robillard."

Charlotte actually *had* worked diligently on the vocal exercises with which Niccolò had bullied her. The voice seemed stronger, more secure: a fresh, clear, sugary mezzo-soprano heard to advantage away from the astringent, piercing leadership of Miss Wells. Niccolò would have liked to dispense with the latter altogether, but feared Watson's wrath and reprisals of an obvious sort.

Charlotte had improved in other ways, also. She seemed more womanly and mature; her arms, legs, and bosom had all filled and rounded; certain boyish gaucheries vanished, and she was subtler, softer, more artful and feminine, while retaining a suggestion of the wayward gaming. Niccolò found her entrancing. She projected hints of a simple, relaxed amorality that dispensed a kind of absolution. Despite barriers of age, language, and background, he felt comfortable with her. And he no longer felt comfortable with women, who found him awesome and bizarre.

Charlotte alone had failed to notice, regarding his eccentric appearance as familiar and charming, and his artistry as no more remarkable

than her own pedestrian talents. She accepted his gifts of jewelry; she opened (albeit minimally) to his sporadic spurts of lust; she sang entr'acte duets and collected modest fees, and she even played with Achillino.

The Covent Garden series, which Laporte again managed for the violinist, proved less than financially gratifying. The heat, the plague, London's waning concert attendance during the summer months, and the still persistent controversies of Paganini's earlier visit combined to shrink the till to a lamentable figure. At another time, Niccolò might not have considered such rewards worth a Channel crossing. Now he wrote good-humoredly to Geremi that he was keeping Covent Gardens open at a time when that showplace would otherwise be collecting cobwebs. He sunned himself in the park when the weather was not too dismal. He watched Achilles skipping rope with his merry young mistress. Charlotte tied one end of the rope to a tree trunk and chanted all sorts of quaint doggerel as she turned or jumped. He marveled at the boy's cleverness and beauty, and the quick skill with which he was learning English, imitating Charlotte's sounds, learning to repeat little phrases, amusing her with his cunning.

Best of all, when Niccolò and Achilles returned to the continent for a swift tour of French and Belgian cities, Charlotte was permitted to accompany them, flanked by her father, of course, and the inevitable Miss Wells. The latter contributed her mediocre vocal services and a calculated indifference that Niccolò recognized as disapproval of one in no position to cast the first stone.

Charlotte noted it, too, with mild indignation.

"Henrietta's become such a bloody lady since she took to bed with Papa," was her comment. "Heavens! I wonder what they do there—read the *Bible*? Her laughter, impartially irreverent of sleeping child, *Bible* readers, and sinners of a more demonstrative nature, rippled through the house.

Chapter Three: The Baron; The Abduction that Failed

Very well, then; if absurd, he would be absurd. True, he could never hope to justify so garish a departure from sanity to Geremi, to Rossini, to his worldly friends. He would not even bother to make the effort. The authentic nobility would remain unmoved. Not for noble lineage or a fresh patent had he been honored by chancellors and emperors, ruling princes, and popes. And as long as he lived; as long as those who had been witness to his absurdity lived, there would hover about his world a suppressed merriment. Veiled smirks would trail him. Analyses of his folly would pepper the conversation of cafe, green room, and orchestra pit.

“Not content to be the richest and greediest performer in the world,” he could hear some dandified young idler in mauve inform his chortling friends, “Paganini has just purchased a spurious title...Why, he has made his father a baron and his mother a baroness...”

Yes, the news would prove heart-warming to enemies and a source of embarrassment to friends. Self-delusion had never been one of Niccolò’s problems. On the contrary, he was often plagued by a horrible clairvoyance. The disadvantages of his course shone crystal-clear, yet he had no choice but to embark upon it.

Nor did he imagine for a moment that a title brought certitudes and stability. Too many times he had seen the world turn inside out; Europe was a clutter of erstwhile rulers and defunct nobility. The briefly regnant Princess of Lucca had taught him many things, both by precept and example. That nothing endures was the most valuable of these. For where was her gaudy grandeur; where her ambitions, her straining? There remained only impermanence, the shifting sands of mode and circumstance. The true patent of nobility, he knew (as everyone knew), lay in what he had done and would yet do.

But because the decision finally had to be made, and he found himself once again involved in the unpleasant business of acquiring a title, he sounded out Charlotte and Achillino, the persons likely to be most profoundly affected.

Charlotte giggled at the very notion.

“Oh, Lord, a baron!” she exclaimed in English. Then she laughed until she cried. “Will it cost much?”

“Very much.”

“Then I’d rather buy *things*,” Charlotte reflected. She had begun to collect furs, gowns, and bonnets.

“But would you not like to be a baroness?” Niccolò pressed.

“Me? A baroness?”

Charlotte’s amusement was genuine; she would not be impressed. A title, after all, could neither be touched, felt, nor worn. It would not affect her mode of life. Whether or not Niccolò married her—and what would be the point in marrying such an old man, since there was certainly no brat on the way—he would always live cheaply and shabbily in unfashionable quarters and spend only what was necessary.

Her reaction astonished Niccolò. He had expected a plebeian avidity. Her smiling indifference jarred and annoyed.

Achillino, being a child, was puzzled. He wondered what a baron might be—he had thought it somebody’s name—and then queried why. He didn’t know whether he wanted to be one. In fact, he preferred to be himself, Achillino. He didn’t see why he should be a baron while Pierre Robillard didn’t have to be one. It seemed that he and Pierre Robillard remained as they were.

But one should not, Niccolò patiently concluded, sound out a child as to the wisdom of destiny. A child accepted rank as he breathed or played or grew, without appreciation of meanings and wants; the Hapsburg Emperor was no match for a small mongrel dog in Achillino’s universe. How could the child be expected to understand that this dubious undertaking was contemplated wholly for his own sake; that his inher-

itance must be not only of tangible wealth but contain the symbols of power, dignity, and rank? The title was being purchased for Achillino, for the difference it would make in the way he would one day be regarded as a man by men.

In time, the preposterousness of the purchase would be forgotten. The smirks would subside; the gossip, be stilled; the friends, mollified or vanish or die. But Achilles would be accorded the respect due a hereditary nobleman. After a quarter-century, no one would remember whether this or any title had been purchased in the nineteenth century or bestowed by his rustic liege lord in the twelfth.

Legitimation must follow, and quickly; and together, baronetcy and legitimation would form the basis of a solid future for the little boy. Soon he, Niccolò, would be among the Shades. The child was very intelligent, even moderately talented, but his lot would be that of common men, monied or impecunious, who live out their lives in mediocrity. Baron Achilles, however: educated, urbane, inheritor of *Delizia* and an attendant fortune, would move in a most privileged sphere. He had no Satanic pact to sustain him, no curse of genius, no demons to kindle great fires...Let him, then, have land and a title: these would define his position and help him make his way. The future, at best, is a labyrinth, full of tortuous blandishments and errors.

From time to time, Niccolò had sent out discreet feelers, pursued rumors, obliquely sounded out rapacious middlemen and poor relations. It was by no means a simple matter to obtain a title of consequence; the less fastidious, he learned, often settled for fictional nomenclature.

The class of scoundrels who made a living by bringing together Europe's flotsam princelings—real, sometimes, or defunct—and solvent aspirants to nobility proved even more distasteful to Niccolò than innkeepers and impresarios. One could not dispense with their services altogether, since they formed a needed bridge to potential bestowers, afloat all over Europe after the revolutionary upheavals, but difficult to approach about so sensitive a matter. After all, it did not become one

to bargain on his own behalf. The project was so unsavory that Niccolò repeatedly abandoned it. Still, it was necessary for the boy's sake. Let Geremi raise eloquent eyebrows; let Gioachino shrug. The world would be impressed and he, who had known all honors, would be *Monsieur le Baron*.

He would have preferred an Italian title, any region's designated honor, and paid even more handsomely. But Italy lay splintered, each member possessed by a succession of *Risorgimento* and unification, unstable voices even at their most ecstatic. The bounty came from an unexpected quarter: the Frenchified Westphalian, Prince Friedrich of Saxe-Kyrburg, who had been a passionate devotee of the Little Corporal, a hero of the Eastern campaigns, and—since the Kingdom of Westphalia was a Napoleonic creation—actually no prince at all, or at best, a most flawed and questionable one.

Profligate son of a profligate father, Prince Friedrich had fallen upon seedy times and was prepared to issue a patent of nobility to Paganini's specifications, rendering the title transmissible from father to son till time was no more. Again, as when he craved a papal decoration, Niccolò embarked upon an anguish of negotiations. Eventually, he was created a Knight of the First Class of the Order of St. Stanislas, loosely translated "Baron," with all attendant benefits, whatever these might be.

The actual process was simple and (for obvious reasons) almost surreptitious. Remembering Antonia's barbs concerning the hard-won Order of the Golden Spur and forewarned by Charlotte's merriment, he kept his own counsel until the wish had become fact. The brevet, a beautiful thing in magnificent French manuscript lettering studded with flowing ribbons and grand seals, reached him by flunky with clicking heels and mock-military bearing. Charlotte fomented her would-be lover with questions concerning the youthful bearer. Never, she declared, had she seen so beautiful a man.

Niccolò promptly did two things. Painstakingly, weighing each word, he wrote out an announcement for the Parisian press that *Mon-*

sieur Paganini had been made a baron. Then he dashed to the stationer's to order a variety of calling cards in the modish pastel hues, pink, lavender, and pale yellow. These proclaimed his newly minted pedigree in an acceptable manner. Even Achillino was impressed. His father had not hitherto kept calling cards.

The musicians of Paris charitably ignored the change in status. He noted no covert glances, no wry smiles; his appearance at the *Opéra* or in a drawing room elicited no muted buzzing. Cheerfully, Niccolò attributed the consummate tact of his colleagues to envy and reaped pleasure therefrom. To Geremi, on the other hand, he found it difficult to convey his good fortune. "Particulars will follow in my next letter," he promised.

But they never did; only the florid titular designation, which might have been construed as irony...

* * *

Later, he blamed Urbani and the helplessness that had prompted him to seek the services of a secretary. With superb confidence, the young émigré, presenting himself before his countryman during the latter's third tour, declared that he spoke English. Perhaps he even believed this, though Niccolò soon learned that Urbani had exaggerated. Despite faultless credentials, what he spoke bore only an oblique resemblance to English. Unfortunately, Niccolò came to this realization slowly, through the smirks of English friends and misrepresentations of a contractual nature that continued to haunt him for many months. Urbani's ultimate genius, it seemed, lay in the creation of confusion.

But when Niccolò submitted to the drain on his income and disposition, he had other things in mind. He recognized in the transplanted young apothecary (for that was, indeed, Urbani's legitimate calling, in which he had served a long apprenticeship in his native Bari) a voracious appetite for intrigue, quite in the tradition of *commedia dell'arte*. Urbani seemed a born go-between, eager to please, eager to keep a secret and share the secrets of others. Such a man, Niccolò felt, might prove useful.

Actually, he proved disastrous. He intrigued with Paganini concerning Charlotte and with Charlotte concerning Paganini, and he plotted with John Watson and his priggish *inamorata* against the pair of them, precipitating the humiliating fiasco of the Boulogne-sur-Mer.

But perhaps the scheme would have backfired anyway, even without the offices of such a prevaricator. Niccolò had long ago bowed his head to the proposition that life was a series of outrages strung on feeble threads.

* * *

He sat in the curtained carriage and waited, watching the breaking of waves upon the rocky shore and wondering uneasily what the morrow would bring. The plan, surely a masterpiece, ought to have solved the most pressing of his problems. Charlotte would step from the steamer into his arms; he would be rid of the ubiquitous Watson and his never-ending demands, and the future would be garlanded with optimism and joy.

Arrangements had been disarmingly simple. Weary of her Cinderella status, Charlotte had come to him of her own accord, tear-stained and desperate. Her Nicky, she now reminded him, had talked fervidly of marriage in the past. Well, that was what she wanted. She would no longer be the pawn of her father's greed and slave to the officious Henrietta. The latter had even confiscated, without explanation or apology, some of the gifts dear Nicky had presented: a fact that of itself inspired "dear Nicky" with an impulse to murder. Moreover, there was no point in appealing to Watson. While he might be overjoyed to have his daughter comfortably and permanently settled at the side of the Italian Midas, he would expect to be compensated—handsomely—for the loss of such an asset. Rather than offer a dowry, John Watson in effect expected a massive bride-price, payable to himself. This consideration moved him more deeply than specific legalities that might or might not ensue. If it meant money in his pocket, he would gladly drive his daughter into the streets.

Niccolò listened, sick with rage at ingratitude. He should have let his erstwhile manager, who had repeatedly robbed him at the source of provincial receipts, rot in the debtors' prison to which British courts, in their wisdom, had seen fit to consign him. With Watson in prison, one could at least be safe from his machinations (for a time). But no, Niccolò had been moved by Charlotte's tears. He had redeemed Watson's debts, and he had once again turned the cobra loose upon himself. The fruits of generosity had always been bitter, Niccolò knew, even within the encompassing glow of kinship.

To marry or not remained a complex, open question. Perhaps if Geremi quickly procured the rural estate, there would be need of an acceptable chatelaine. Perhaps if Charlotte discarded her casual Protestantism, which Niccolò viewed severely as no religion at all and a poor example to Achillino, there would be some basis for discussing the possibility. Niccolò began to experience the familiar doubts, trepidations, and mood-shifts. He enumerated splendid reasons for marrying, sharing these with his correspondents, yet he underwent the vivid panic of his youth before so awesome a step. Perhaps Charlotte was, after all, too young, too tarnished, too unlettered, too knowledgeable...

But this he knew: he wanted her. He wanted to rescue her from bondage. If marriage was a sacrament to be approached with fearsome awe, there remained accommodations and variations that needed no belaboring. One would see, one would see...In any event, Watson and his prune-faced companion had known the last of his bounty.

At this point, Niccolò enlisted the aid of his versatile secretary, whose limitations as an English conversationalist had already been revealed to him, but who seemed to indicate other aptitudes. He should have been forewarned by Urbani's too ready comprehension of the matter; the minx had spent long hours in confidence with his sympathetic young assistant. Urbani immediately expressed the opinion that Charlotte must find her way to her lover by stealth. If apprised in advance, Watson would either imprison her or demand a ruinous award for his

“deprivation.” Since Urbani echoed Paganini’s own views and apprehensions, Niccolò found him very wise and at once began to pursue these suggestions.

Paganini was to return to France and did, as he had before, making the customary farewells and suggestions for joint undertakings in the future. A week later, Charlotte was to leave the Watson-Wells household, ostensibly to visit her forlorn mother in Bath, but actually to spend the night in the Drury Lane house of Urbani’s mother-in-law and to proceed the following morning to Folkstone for the Channel crossing. Paganini was to await her in Boulogne-sur-Mer, and the remainder of their personal history was to be, by blueprint and definition, a saga of unqualified bliss.

Niccolò and Charlotte meticulously followed each step of the conspiracy, but Urbani, it later appeared, improvised a few of his own. He had been well paid for his efforts; on leaving London, Paganini—after parting with a fine sum in pounds sterling—had succeeded in placing the erstwhile secretary with an English chemist (an opportunity long hoped-for but elusive); and Charlotte, in the exuberance of her gratitude, had parted with a diamond brooch, one of her most cherished possessions. But during the course of the negotiations, it occurred to Urbani that the same plot might yield even greater rewards. Indeed, the one with the most to gain or lose ought not be expected to dwell in ignorance. Even before Charlotte departed the parental roof, Urbani had accosted Watson in the neighborhood pub, hinting (in crippled English and suave Italian) that he had intelligence worth a few pounds, possibly more, to his listener.

Thus Niccolò, anonymous in his curtained chaise, awaited the errant Charlotte. But others awaited her, also: John Watson, whose ire had failed to blight his righteousness and oratory; Miss Wells, the very embodiment, or so it seemed, of Britannic virtue; the English consul, extending the protection of the Union Jack; and at least half a hundred on-lookers, including duly invited representatives of the press. John Watson’s

hot statement was ready, as were the newspapers. Women wept; foghorns hooted. Charlotte fell hysterically into her father's arms, begging forgiveness, and Henrietta Wells regarded the pandemonium with spinsterly disapproval underscored by the extreme satisfaction of having been right, after all.

Niccolò tried feverishly to approach his beloved. He charged into the emotional fray, waving, gesticulating, screaming her name...

"That, *messieurs*, is the vile seducer who abducted my sixteen-year-old daughter," Watson roared, assuming the stance of one of his country's less gifted Shakespearean actors.

"Nicky!" cried Charlotte, her arms ambiguously outstretched.

Miss Wells, grunting sagaciously, seized Charlotte's wrists, while angry murmurs arose from the onlookers and a smirking *gendarme* suggested that all disperse. Watson proclaimed that he would sue for damages. Charlotte struggled with Miss Wells, whom she called a strumpet, and heard herself so called in return. She ended by biting Henrietta before being hauled off by her father.

As for Niccolò, he fled, terrified that the God-fearing citizens at the dock might tear him to shreds. He became violently ill before reaching Paris, where he took to bed at the *Hôtel des Princes*, refusing to see anyone. Achillino kept watch outside the door, conveying what was needed—most often, fresh quills.

Chapter Four: The Scandal; Exhaustion

Niccolò wrote eloquently and at length to the French press that had presumed to judge him, explaining, haranguing, and offering. Charlotte was no sixteen-year-old child, he proclaimed indignantly; she had completed her eighteenth year. There had been no need to seduce her; she had pleaded to be rescued, and his intentions were both compassionate and honorable.

As for Watson, he was a knave. He had abandoned wife and children, living and traveling openly with his mistress, Miss Wells. Not only had the villain appropriated huge sums owed Niccolò as a result of the mismanagement of the English provincial tours; he had in fact been saved from debtors' prison by his duped, altruistic client. The puritanic zeal displayed at the wharf and his posture as an outraged father had little to do with morality. On the contrary, this evil man—who might have intercepted his daughter in Folkstone, rather than create a spectacle in France—regarded Charlotte wholly as an investment; she could be sold piecemeal or presented to the highest bidder.

Only the fact that Niccolò, after being repeatedly fleeced, after viewing Charlotte's unhappiness and degradation in the Watson-Wells ménage, after tasting ingratitude, now proposed to marry the impoverished girl without paying tribute to her father: only *that* had disturbed Watson and led to the self-righteous carnival at Boulogne-sur-Mer.

The newspapers gratefully printed each salacious tidbit, as well as the polemic waterfalls that ensued from the general public. Everyone, it seemed, had an opinion, so the matter was kept buoyantly alive for many weeks, in both England and France. Paganini made few converts. The dominant view was that he had behaved ignobly, beguiling an innocent maiden and conveying her to France for evil purposes.

He bombarded Charlotte with letters, pleading with her to deny the ugly charges and to explain to the world what had actually occurred. He offered repeatedly to marry her, but only *after* his name had been pub-

licly cleared and without payment of any sort to Watson. Predictably, his pleas met with silence.

As the pleasurable rumble of scandal continued in the Parisian press, Niccolò swallowed his bile and wrote Urbani, requesting information concerning Charlotte's health and well-being. Though Niccolò felt entitled to rail, scold, curse, and blame, his words emerged meekly; he could not afford to antagonize his slippery intermediary...yet. In time, Urbani answered his dear patron, whom he missed beyond his poor power to convey, relaying that the Watsons and Miss Wells had left London that very week—indeed, they now found themselves on the high seas bound for America, where *Signor* Watson hoped to repair his ailing fortunes. He, Urbani, wondered whether there was not some other service or commission he might perform for his dearest friend and benefactor...

The journalistic storm slowly subsided, though Niccolò continued to simmer with rage before an injustice that seemed clear only to himself. Did he experience relief, too, and awareness of an even greater crisis averted? His emotions remained knotted and unclear. He awoke half a dozen times a night, sick with humiliation, angry, sometimes weeping for his lost Charlotte, but sometimes serenely grateful that he need not marry, after all. One day he wrote Germi that he was well rid of her. The next day...

* * *

He returned to Genoa with Achilles, visiting Germi and remnants of his family. Germi made much of the boy, praised his erudition and beauty, and with great emotion pressed upon him mementoes of his own childhood (a stuffed bear, old coins, a chipped abacus), which Achilles found altogether meaningless and tawdry. How difficult to communicate across the dead years, even when the bond is of flesh and blood, Niccolò thought. Our yesterdays are ashes to the young.

They climbed the uneven lanes that led to *Passo del gato moro*.

"It is dirty," the boy observed.

“Look, Achillino. This used to be our house,” Niccolò panted. He had to walk briskly to keep pace with the child on the narrow, winding streets broken into irregular stairs.

Everything remained: the squalor, the stench, the old men delousing themselves in the sunlight, the clotheslines crisscrossed over narrow alleyways, the dark cats arching, licking themselves, dozing fitfully...But everything seemed smaller than in memory, shrunken into a wizened facsimile of itself, less hopeful, less vivid, and encrusted in older filth.

“We were crowded,” Niccolò recalled. “There, that window, that is the room where I was confined to practice eight hours a day.”

“But why did you live here, since it was so dirty and unpleasant? Why didn’t you move into the hotel?”

“Often,” Niccolò mused, “one does not know what becomes of time. I remember the day Carlo and I first journeyed to Lucca with our father. It was very grey; it was raining when we left. An uncanny odor heaved up from the waterfront, although the sea was calm.”

And he was stabbed by the sojourner’s bitter wisdom, knowing so much of life lay behind him.

“Tell me,” Achilles demanded suddenly, having lost interest in the anecdotal stories. “Am I to have a mother, as you promised?”

Niccolò looked up into the eyes of a startled little girl pressing her nose, from within, against the streaked window glass of the familiar room, *his* room.

“We shall see; we shall see.”

“I thought so,” nodded Achillino, long attuned to irresolution.

Niccolò waved to the girl-child, who grinned bashfully, covered her tiny face, and vanished. “The young are unaware,” he muttered. “Not till I left Genoa did I learn to feel for those who continued their struggle here.” Then, with sudden bewilderment, for the idea had never occurred to him before, he added, “My father had a hard life, a very hard life.”

The little girl’s face appeared guardedly at the window and disappeared once again.

“There are too many cats here, and they stink. And the people—they do not seem very clean.”

“Can you not smell the sea, Achillino?” On a clear day, you could see...My eyes are no longer strong. And the boats made lowing noises, like beasts led to slaughter. At sunset, you will not believe this, the sun dissolved into the water. First, it fell in and just drifted toward the horizon, slowly disintegrating, and then—why, it soon melted away, turned to nothing, as though lost in black ink.”

“Did my grandmother and my grandfather live here, too?”

“Many years. All their children were born here.”

“Why did they not ask *Signor* Germi to buy them a better house?”

“They were poor. Do you know what it means, really, to be poor?”

“Then they should have given many more concerts,” Achillino decided blithely, certain of the source of all riches and unmoved by the ugly old quarter that made his father so weepy and pensive.

An urchin flung pebbles after the well-shod strangers as they descended, the child hopping on either foot, the man following cautiously. From a nearby alley, baleful tomcat yowls scissored the late summer stillness. My dead youth, such as it was, Niccolò thought. One did not recapture; none had lived to retrace. Achillino, spawned in the great, anonymous world, had no true heritage. The dust of his people, the pity of their strivings, the terror of their loneliness and death brought only boredom and a reminder of his own neckties. Perhaps that was as it was meant to be.

The next day, Niccolò procured Germi’s promises that a country estate would be his within that year. The advocate was exploring two excellent possibilities, both open, as yet, to haggling and strategies. Germi also had a letter for Paganini from Urbani, advising his “dear friend” of the latest news from America. Charlotte had run away from her father and married a wild Native American...However, if Paganini, his dear friend and patron, had other commissions to be executed, preferably in London...

Niccolò could not contain his joy. He embraced his *carissimo* Luigi, the latter's housekeeper, Camilletta, and the boy, dancing about the room in an effusion of merriment, howling that the very Devil had done battle for him, after all.

"Are you mad?" inquired Germi. "First sackcloth and ashes, and now you behave like some pimply rustic being tickled on the toes."

"Oh, Papa is often like that, and even worse," Achillino explained.

* * *

Not lechery, he realized sadly. Not lechery, but only desolation, anxiety, and the clutch of his own waning powers...The world had exhausted him, even as he was exhausting the world. He yearned to travel no more. Germi would find him a country seat. Perhaps his old friend would also find him an orchestra to lead. After Cristoforo Columbo, was he not Genoa's most esteemed son?

Chapter Five: Hector Berlioz

He had lost fluency, the very tongue of his musical intelligence. No longer did the notes fly from pen to paper, even when implored and cajoled. The Dark Angel had clearly grown disinterested in his utterances, and while he could still perform admirably, he seemed unable to compose. Enough had been accrued for a lifetime of use and re-use, but the spring had begun to wither. Niccolò wondered wearily whether he would write again, and whether, composing or not, he had left his mark on European music. Once, he had recited the names of the great precursors, revering and rejecting, knowing it his burden to break beyond the neat boundaries they had devised. He had gone forth boldly, but suddenly the world viewed him as archaic and tame. What he said was intricately garlanded but essentially simple. He spoke the soaring language of Donizetti and Bellini, innocent of the leaden gloom, the desperation, the massiveness of the new century, already so wingless and disillusioned.

Despite fitful resolution to publish his works, he had remained reluctant to do so. His manuscripts lay in sprawled disorder at the bottom of the bag or in the keeping of friends: but with pages lost, studded with cues understood only by himself, and solo parts often missing. Niccolò guarded his works, desirous that their performance be limited during his lifetime and under no circumstances be associated with another's name. Nevertheless, reports of piracy reached him: of Paganini concertos offered in the wrong keys and with faulty embellishments by seedy scrapers of catgut unknown to him, who somehow boasted of possessing authentic manuscripts revised by the master himself. Niccolò was determined to publish, yet he begrudged the mediocre access to his revelations. And what a titanic chore confronted him in assembling the thousands of manuscript pages and rendering them complete and publishable! No; no, it was too discouraging..

Yet would he, too, be a great precursor? Would he be remembered beyond the grave, not for the myth of his impossible virtuosity, not for

the bizarre adventures he had had, but as a creator? The question gnawed stealthily at work and sleep. Enviously, he thought of that young Hector Berlioz, starving. The incredible richness and complexity of the Frenchman's palette—Rossini had once shrieked that Berlioz needed a hundred men to produce a plain *forte*—brought sadness to Niccolò and a conviction that he would forever be an outsider to so alien an art.

He must have an orchestra to transform! That was, after all, the supernal instrument. It would inspire in him new sources: turbulence worthy of his generation's strivings and the fragmented times in which he lived: crashing chaos suggestive of a world without order or faith. Genoa, the ugly port city that had given him birth and his progenitors burial, might yet provide his new cannon. If not, another donor would be found. One way or the other, Niccolò would continue to clamor.

"Whom are you writing, Father?" Achillino inquired. All the events of his life, change and movement and brief companionship, seemed to evolve out of Niccolò's intricate correspondence.

"Hector Berlioz. He is a young composer."

"Is he a friend?"

"Scarcely."

"Then why do you write him?"

"I am commissioning a new work for viola and mighty orchestra. See? I am sending him money. If he accepts, I may send more."

"Why?"

"Because," Niccolò began. Then he hesitated and laughed malevolently. "Because I have eaten crumbs from so many tables. Now I can myself distribute patronage. I am a baron."

Achillino seem puzzled. "It is silly to spend money for *notes* when you already have so many," he said.

"The heart," Niccolò continued absently (writing his name with a great flourish and complex shadings of his fine pen), "is an innocent organ blamed for all passions. I am celebrating, in a sense, the withdrawal of my heart from the discomfort of the passions. I shall love no more,

Achillino. Your father grows old. He has put his heart out to pasture in the icy wastelands, so that he may preserve it. We must celebrate this, you and I, because we are barons, because our investments are growing, because we are now masters of men, not underlings.”

“Really, Father!” Achillino was exasperated. “I don’t know what you are talking about.” He watched the application of the candle to the stick of sealing wax and the molten wax to the baronial envelop.

“One should be wary of two things,” Niccolò muttered: “a discarded mistress and the land of one’s nativity.”

Now the leading rumor had it that Charlotte was unmarried after all; that she had begun to enjoy a great success in America as a soubrette in foolish operettas. Well, who could foretell? America might yet offer him fantastic wealth and a willing Charlotte. Next year, perhaps, or shortly thereafter...

He watched the scarlet wax harden, smiling sadly, knowing some strange turn of his journey completed, with joy and knowledge receding into the seascape and dissolving like the extinguished end of day in the inky waters.

Chapter Six: Delizia in Parma

“Whether this is, indeed, your *Delizia* I am unable to say,” Germi wrote. “It is only fair to warn you that the estate is heavily encumbered. And I am not sure you would wish to take up residence in the Duchy of Parma.” He added prophetically, “One must decide slowly and prudently, lest more anguish than delight ensue. One need not suffer remorse for deeds not done.”

Niccolò answered tersely, “One need suffer remorse *only* for deeds not done,” aware that he wrote with more rhetoric than philosophy and would not impress his cautious friend.

Too great a longing, too awesome an expenditure of years and patience had preceded the availability of the Villa Gaione. Thoroughly forewarned, Niccolò could find no flaw in the huge, neglected, legally manacled acreage of Count Castellinardo. Germi’s words, alas, were as written on water. Gaione’s owner had dissipated numerous fortunes, anchored his hereditary estates with liens, claims, and mortgages, and now hovered on the brink of bankruptcy, yet he viewed his prospective purchaser as a bourgeois upstart whom it was his duty to fleece. The count, no doubt, was as sincere as he was shrewd, having lived and procured credit on little more than impudence for half his life, without noticeable loss of stature.

Surely more than a place, Parma quickened memories mistakenly deemed dead. Niccolò remembered going there to meet his old teacher, Alessandro Rolla, who had instructed him in boyhood with patience and forbearance and, years later, helped him to acclaim with patience and exasperation. He had revisited Parma several times during his wandering years—as during the interlude with Angelina Cavanna—always experiencing a vague, almost physical distaste tinged with guilt and nostalgia, as though aware of matters best forgotten.

Even before Niccolò viewed the estate, he had decided. Repeatedly Germi admonished him for his recklessness, pointing out that the im-

poverished nobleman, aware of Paganini's eagerness, turned more surly and demanding each day. But Niccolò could no longer be deterred. He goaded Germi, agreeing to Castellinaro's every preposterous suggestion, taking on the count's encumbrances and paying handsomely for the privilege. Gaione must be his, whatever the cost or the consequence.

Even in his first outburst of irrational enthusiasm, Niccolò could not declare Gaione beautiful. Enormous, yes; laid out on a scale suggestive of an inconceivably heroic way of life, the house rose stolidly about a paved courtyard with an undersized, pipe-like fountain, its rectangularity softened by the massive, shaggily bearded trees and the flaming oleander. The gardens had fallen into neglect; the artificial lake, muddied over, no longer glittered with darting, jeweled fish or darkly mirrored the serene, gliding dream-movement of Castellinaro's swans.

Gaione *had been* a great estate, but its olive trees squatted in an infertile grove gnarled with disease; its irrigation system had failed; the wells were polluted; grapes rotted on their vines; weeds flourished everywhere. Within, all was flaking and untidy, evidence of an unconcerned exploitation. The count, out of caprice or need, had denuded several rooms of their furnishings, leaving vast, drafty, loudly echoing areas with cracks in the plaster, disintegrating panel-work, and a lone, sorely faded mural depicting the valor of a paternal ancestor. The third floor of the estate was inhabited by a flock of slatterns, old family retainers too lazy or too secure to exert themselves beyond dawdling in the kitchen, agitating the dirt and the cobwebs, and gossiping about the fortunes of past and future masters.

Germi suggested that years of careful management and a lavish outlay would be needed to correct the neglect of the house and grounds, free the estate from its legal fetters, and render "delight" a possibility rather than a fantasy. Niccolò, however, panted for squiredom. Within a week, he authorized Germi to pay the astonished Count Castellinaro his asking price of three hundred thousand *lire*. "No, no, I disdain to haggle,"

he protested when Germi declared the sum absurd, surely a mere starting point for the forthcoming battle of legal wits.

Thus Niccolò, who had haggled bitterly in the past over the price of a meal or a room in a common inn, acquired the keys to Villa Gaione by the most divine right he knew: money. For a few benighted moments, he sincerely regarded himself a landed baron with more than a trace of royal purple in his veins and a hallowed principality to defend to the death.

But the realities at once confronted him. While Germi still grappled with the legal aspects of the transaction and the innumerable claims festering upon the estate, Niccolò turned his energies to the task of making Gaione habitable. There were stairs and floors to be repaired, shattered windows needing replacement, despoiled paneling to restore, and no end of concealed decay. Gaione was to become the seat of Baron Paganini's descendants, and the baron astonished himself and all who had known him by his extraordinary tolerance of costs. Workmen swarmed about the premises; the thieving overseer was replaced with another, even more dishonest one; and a few house servants were sent packing as an example to others. Eventually, the wells were declared safe, though Niccolò continued to drink only mineral water.

Early in the course of the massive restoration, he recognized the endless nature of his enterprise. The command of a principality required a commander. He could not make a career, as do regnant conquerors, of occupying territory. He possessed no background in the exercise of authority. Often, he glimpsed the smirks and repressed laughter of servants—whom he paid—when his back was turned. He began to suspect conspiracy and mischief hatching everywhere.

If he had married...If Gaione had a mistress...If Achillino had a mother...

Loneliness, remorse, an intensified awareness of loss again gripped Niccolò, causing him to lose enthusiasm for his present project almost as soon as he had removed himself to Parma. His thoughts, in the enervating limbo between sleep and waking, were of the end of life, of no one

hearing his last pious pleas for water, for a handclasp, for help in reaching his bed. The hollow resonance of Gaione's great, square rooms became terrifying; the solitude itself, a strangling presence.

No, the situation could no longer be endured. He, too, would go to America. A fresh fortune awaited him in the uncouth land so avid for European refinements. His will had always sustained him and would not fail him now. He would survive the journey and prosper. In America, he would claim Charlotte, his bride, whose youth and levity contained the power to rejuvenate him. He wrote at tedious length to Geremi, outlining his new schemes.

Geremi did not attempt to dissuade him, but with obvious annoyance proposed it was perhaps time to initiate measures for the legitimization of Achilles. "Sometimes I wonder whether mere declamation of purpose is truly all you intend," Geremi wrote in an outburst of scathing candor. "Your plans, if I may believe them, are capital, but when it comes to their implementation, you seem incapable of signing your name to a document. While I have no reason to suppose Parma more amenable to another Italian city, the personal history of its grand duchess, who in her time has borne a bastard or two, leads us to hope there might be sympathy from that quarter. If I remember correctly, you made the acquaintance of this excellent sovereign some years ago in Vienna. She might indeed be influenced by your affectionate relationship with Chancellor Metternich.

"In any event," Geremi concluded, "it would not hurt to pay your respects to the Marie Louise. After that has been accomplished, you may decide whether you want to sail to America, whether I am to prosecute the recent overseer of Gaione, and whether we are to proceed as quickly as possible with the business of legitimization, in Parma or elsewhere.

* * *

The golden-haired Hapsburg princess whom Napoleon had married by proxy after disposing of Josephine, ravished in her carriage in the out-

skirts of Paris, and returned to Austria as the tenuous alliance waned, had been granted all sorts of compensations.

She had been a fresh, passive, somewhat insipid young girl who met all male decisions, whether on the part of the Emperor of the Austrians or the Emperor of the French, with resignation and smiling obedience. She accepted things as they were, and generally they were not unendurable.

The authors of the Treaty of Vienna had cogitated over the plight of Marie Louise, briefly Empress, mother of the sickly King of Rome. Speaking for herself with the utmost meekness, Marie Louise requested an annulment of her ill-starred marriage, that she might be free to marry Count Neipperg. Abhorring a vacuum, she had already admitted the handsome, one-eyed courtier, designated her aide and councilor by the omniscient Metternich, to her bed. In view of the political situation, Napoleon's defeat and exile, and the fact that by 1814 the Corsican was viewed as the butcher of Europe in Vatican circles, an annulment should not have been too difficult to procure. But the Austrian monarch and his chancellor searched their souls and measured the effect such an annulment might have on native youth and foreign opinion—none of which consideration, apparently, strained Marie Louise's passivity or undermined Count Neipperg's ardor.

The restored legitimist princess, duly weaned from the Bonapartist errors of her royal father and his government, thus became Duchess of Parma, Piacenza, and Guastalla, her grant embracing the wee territories of Pauline Bonaparte. In time, Marie Louise negotiated her annulment and remarriage, after patiently bearing Count Neipperg two children on whom the Austrian Emperor had to bestow names and titles. She settled in Parma, where she obediently pursued her consort's interests in the arts, sciences, and industries, as became a good Hapsburg wife. When the swashbuckling Neipperg went on to his eternal reward, the grand duchess proved predictably inconsolable and helpless. Again Metternich sent assistance in the form of an available nobleman, Count Bombelles,

who competently relieved her of the onus of political responsibility and also warmed her bed.

The grand duchess waited a decent though minimal interval after the death of her beloved Neipperg before ecclesiastical union with Bombelles. Even prior to this event, the citizens of Parma observed that the new consort differed from his predecessor, being severe, unimaginative, stingy, and obsessively pious. Marie Louise, however, failed to notice. Her passivity and obedience remained fixed, even when the object of her veneration changed. The duchess, it seemed, regarded ideas as definitely beyond the capacities of woman. Submission was another matter, more comprehensible, not nearly as unpleasant as reputed, and more or less her duty. For was there not something written—in the Scriptures, perhaps? So her confessor had explained when she departed for France many, many years earlier, with fifty-one trunks and a retinue.

However, Niccolò had scarcely a thought for the grand duchess and her consorts. Gaione kept him bitterly busy. When his restlessness grew unbearable, he returned to Genoa for concerts, to accept a medal from his grateful city, and to confer with Germi concerning his flourishing fiscal affairs.

“Better than you deserve,” Germi assured him. “Except for your dilapidated villa of ‘delight,’ all is in order, and you are King Midas. Does that make you happy?”

“I am miserable,” Niccolò answered truthfully.

“It is an affectation, this sorrow of yours. A malaise of the times. It has become very fashionable to mope when one has reason to rejoice.”

“I am very much alone.”

“That is easily corrected.”

“No, I do not think so,” Niccolò replied. He added hoarsely, “Sometimes I think I am cursed.”

“That is nonsense.”

“Niccolò shook his head. “I am also gravely ill.”

Luigi shrugged, smiling skeptically. “It would be unkind, I suppose, to tell you your woes are rather exaggerated.”

The violinist grinned at his old friend. “I have always suspected you think so. Nevertheless, I am deeply grateful just the same and wish to make you a tangible gift.”

“That is not necessary.”

Paganini pressed the point in a sepulchral tone that annoyed his friend. “I plan soon to execute my will. I shall never forget your kindness to me.”

“That, above all, would distress me,” Germi stated sharply. “To be your agent and your friend is sufficient reward.”

“But if I wish it?”

“I am sorry, Niccolò. It happens that *I* do not wish it.”

“Then I shall make you some prior gift, some recognition—”

“As you like, but please believe me. It is not necessary.”

For a moment, Niccolò felt his friend’s icy, deep-seated disapproval. Then Germi laughed and muttered, “I guess one must humor you,” and turned to the papers at hand. Nothing had been altered, nothing given or taken away, but nothing would ever again be quite the same. Niccolò realized that something had come between them, as final as an invisible sheath between lovers, insubstantial yet strong enough to slay. The shock was only awareness, like stumbling upon a familiar barrier in a dark room.

Niccolò did not burden Germi with additional revelations during the remainder of his sojourn. He did not tell his friend that he repeatedly coughed up blood, that he was never without pain, or that he lingered in Genoa only in the hope of procuring leadership of the Carlo Felice Orchestra. When the latter venture ended in failure, he bade his friend an affectionate farewell and returned to Parma, which he now regarded as his home.

A week later, he wrote Migone, his new Milanese banker, requesting that ten thousand *lire* be sent as a gesture of gratitude to his friend, Luigi

Germi of Genoa. He also wrote his sovereign, Grand Duchess Marie Louise, reminding her of their meeting at the home of Chancellor Metternich in Vienna many years earlier, and expressing sincere felicitations and a desire to pay his respects in person.

Niccolò remembered a plain, innocuous woman altogether wanting in patrician bearing, who had only youth to commend her in the muted comparisons with the Empress Josephine. He approached with numbness bordering upon horror. Time improved only wine and choice violins, he supposed; cities and people turned to ruins. The Hapsburg princess looked as though she had spent her forty-four years in servitude. Stoop-shouldered, without an iota of grace, she had merely faded. Her jewels startled; they did not seem to belong to her.

The stubby fingers of her left hand rested on the arm of her consort. Count Bombelles, an elongated, inquisitorial figure with a strangely triangular face, a prominent forehead, and a pointed chin encased in a black, pointed beard, seemed to have emerged from a Spanish dungeon where he had been inventing intricate tortures. Cold and elegant, he bore himself with overbearing grandeur that threw into high relief Marie Louise's lack of style.

"We are pleased you have chosen to take up residence in Parma," said the grand duchess in French. While Niccolò bowed in appreciation, she glanced at the stony profile of her husband to learn whether she had said too much.

"If it pleases Your Highnesses," Niccolò murmured, "I shall plan to perform for one of your charities in the very near future." It had always been a mystery to him that illimitable wealth found so complex and awkward the machinery for easing the burdens of the poor. Quaintly, this obligation fell upon the artist rather than the monarch.

Marie Louise began to express her pleasure in his most generous gesture, but her enthusiasm was modified by the Count.

"One should not use charity to mask frivolity," Bombelles pronounced, gazing reproachfully on his wilted duchess.

He turned to Count Sanvitale, who stood in attention throughout the audience, suggesting he set a date for Baron Paganini's recital for the benefit of Parma's poor. Noting that her consort already regarded the interview as terminated, Marie Louise obediently offered Paganini her hand to kiss.

"It was kind of Chancellor Metternich to send you to Parma," she said. Her pockmarked face had turned splotchy, and the distended lower lip of the Hapsburgs suggested a slumbering dowager about to snore.

Niccolò remained uncertain whether his sovereign duchess was confused, regarding all good things as emanating from the chancellor, or whether she was conveying a blurred signal commemorating their earlier meeting at a happier and more auspicious time. Perhaps she recalled that energetic patron of the Muses, Count Adam Neipperg.

His own thoughts were of the hideous mutations spewed by time, of the death of heroes, and of the magnificent Bonaparte women, Elisa and Pauline, both dead.

Chapter Seven: The Conductor

Like most Italian orchestras, that of Parma was a thing of chance: noisy, uncoordinated, consistently incompetent, and devoid of discipline or pride. It would have been out of the question to place before it a complete symphonic score by Beethoven or even Haydn.

The musicians were notoriously inattentive. They had little sense of dignity or of a confraternity of art, and virtually no security, coming or going without warning, according to official whim. They played pranks on one another, occasionally indulged a pinch of snuff during a sustained rest or an unimportant passage, and paid little heed to cues or entrances. The effect was one of perfunctory chaos. In Parma, the musicians even talked and laughed during an aria, detracting from the enjoyment of the audience and bringing upon themselves quarrels with indignant singers.

In his youth, Niccolò had not been particularly sensitive to these shortcomings. He had never known better. As an anonymous member of a group, he felt uninvolved with its general ineptness, saving his contempt for this fiddler or that unable to execute a rapid passage. It had, as a matter of fact, pleased him to prove himself individually more competent and more demonstrative than the men alongside him; he did not identify his efforts with theirs.

As a virtuoso, Niccolò required only one quality from his accessory orchestra: that it be inconspicuous. Glaring errors disconcerted him, but routine mediocrity—even to the extent that difficult phrases were partially deleted or glossed over—seemed reasonable. He remembered his arguments with Rolla over the Milanese debut; his old mentor regarded a disciplined and rehearsed orchestra as a necessity.

Not until his performances in Vienna, followed by the tour of the Germanic cities, did Niccolò begin to appreciate the potential of an orchestra. The fusion of all tonal resources into an amalgam of power, strength, compassion, infinite tenderness; the realization of every detail of a composer's symphonic vision; the communication, not of private

sensations, passions, and mysteries, but of universal truths: Niccolò had begun to regard such a possibility as worthy of his remaining musical energies.

He had been unable to conclude an agreement with the Carlo Felice of Genoa even after his grateful homeland had had his aquiline features cast in bronze and despite his offer to serve for a year without stipend. Wisely, the management of the theater recognized his aims to be revolutionary. They feared resistance and mutiny, ponderous tampering with the repertoire, and petulant audiences unable to digest the heavy, Teutonic fare. A theater orchestra, after all, was a diversion, an enhancement of the efforts of others. Paganini had no more right to expect involuntary silence from his audience—he had made a solemn issue out of the bad behavior of Italian audiences, the gaiety, laughter, and social visits that accompanied symphonic or operatic performances—than musicians playing out of doors had to command the birds to be stilled or the tides to halt.

As a result, Niccolò found himself in the queasy role of the petitioner, perhaps the most famous one of his times, compelled to leave Genoa in sorrow and pique when his efforts failed. He commented bitterly to Geremi that he could not blame destiny for his good fortune; it had been an uphill battle since birth. Geremi smiled wisely. Some battles, he reminded Niccolò, led downhill. At least good fortune had consented to be baited, whatever the direction or the methods, and to lie meekly in half a dozen of Europe's banks till some foolish ways could be devised to set her free...

But artists and weeds have in common an imperviousness to the sickle. As soon as Niccolò settled in Parma, he had the supreme displeasure of hearing the shaggy, rudderless orchestra of the Ducal Theater. The lacerations, self-pity, and frustrations of the Genoa interlude were promptly forgotten. Hope churned in his bosom, conjuring up shining new glories.

It was at this point in his affairs that Niccolò again encountered Count Sanvitale, privy councilor to the grand duchess, and ardent lover

of music. A native of Parma, the count had been in the service of Marie Louise since her arrival in 1816. Sanvitale's inscrutability had alerted Niccolò to immediate caution. Handsome, well-preserved, and blatantly a schemer, the count seemed to be assessing all situations, probably for purposes unknown or relevant only to himself.

Sanvitale proved a superb foil to his masters. As aide to the energetic Neipperg, he had been attentive and reserved, given to appreciative silences, quietly responsive to the enthusiasms and worldly projects of the nobleman. He was equally adaptable to the Iberian gloom and neurotic religiosity of Neipperg's successor, Bombelles, supporting the latter in his retrenchments, welcoming the numerous clerics who overran the city and palace, agreeing wholeheartedly that processions, public veneration of relics, and morbid fasts afforded greater benefits to the realm than costly, indulgent pleasures such as concerts.

Toward Marie Louise, Sanvitale maintained a crafty deference accompanied by apathy. He bowed and scraped before her as the symbol of Hapsburg hegemony but seldom bothered to heed her, save with respect to trifles. Perhaps his contempt was the stuff of kinship; the count's son had married Marie Louise's eldest daughter, Albertine, sired by Neipperg prior to the ecclesiastical clarification of her mother's status as never having been wife of Napoleon Bonaparte.

With neat Italian cunning, Sanvitale knew his mistress wholly dependent upon a masterful male. Conditioned only to obedience, she possessed neither conviction nor character of her own. He had learned early in the course of his service to the Hapsburg duchess that she was, quite literally, devoid of will; that her submissiveness extended to the echoing of every opinion, prejudice, and crochets of her consort, whose displeasure she dreaded. Out of sheer self-interest, one could only ignore her while ostensibly honoring her wishes. In reality, she forgot those wishes as soon as Neipperg had spoken or, once Neipperg reposed in his grave, Bombelles. The latter's most cantankerous whim was a decree. It did not take Sanvitale long to realize this.

Niccolò soon accepted the privy councilor's effusions and friendly overtures in good faith. Indeed, he needed a friend in Parma and a friend at court. He understood that Marie Louise would not, without close promptings, render his new designs possible. Bombelles might well be master of duchy and duchess, but to the tight-lipped Bombelles Niccolò had no access. On the basis of his first audience, he felt it safe to suppose that Bombelles might view with disfavor any scheme inspired by the mock baron. Perhaps Sanvitale, clever, controlled, and diplomatic, could help neutralize the initial antipathy.

Sanvitale possessed the courtier's talent for ingratiating. In his presence, in the perfectly balanced atmosphere he generated, everyone bloomed with ease. Count Neipperg had been relaxed and gracious, putting down the burden of his own dazzling wit and its strenuous obligations. The grand duchess felt secure; she purred with pleasure at the absence of complexity in life and at the round of simple and stately enterprises from early Mass to late dinner, that led inevitably to the ducal bed. As for Bombelles, he knew himself so genuinely understood that he failed to recite the proper little pieties and expressions of disapprobation at the world's shortcomings, with which he usually bored those condemned to his company. Sanvitale's face beautifully reflected his thoughts and feelings, and Sanvitale even relieved him, at times, of the need to articulate them.

To Paganini, the suave courtier now extended illimitable appreciation and warmth, personal hospitality on a grand scale, and a quick comprehension of purpose. Niccolò discoursed on Beethoven and the German orchestras; he performed chamber music, and he recalled *Matilde di Shabran* and the limitations of the Carlo Felice. He did not have to say too much. While Niccolò was still debating with himself how much he dared reveal, Sanvitale began to realize how blessed would be the lot of musician and lover of music were *someone*—he knew not who—with the maestro's vision, of course, to assume control of the ducal orchestra

of Parma. If only such a distinguished artist could be persuaded...but one could not hope...

It seemed that neither persuasion nor hope was out of the question!

During the ensuing weeks, Niccolò was given ample opportunity to share his views on the outlook for excellence. He analyzed Parma's musical problems: the lack of responsible leadership and discipline, the confusion of functions, and the absence of cohesive standards. Sanvitale fairly wept with joy. Oh, that the ducal orchestra might be elevated to its deserved grandeur, that it might represent the traditional glories of Parma to the world! Would Niccolò consent—would it be presumptuous of the privy councilor—did Sanvitale have Niccolò's permission to convey these most excellent suggestions to the Grand Duchess Marie Louise?

Niccolò blurted that he would be honored if so esteemed an ambassador would present his views to the royal ear. He then returned to Villa Gaione to await the results of Sanvitale's audition with the patience and good humor of a man petitioning for a stay of execution. In his more lucid moments, he thought he might have preferred to address the Hapsburg princess himself, rather than avail himself of even the most exalted and well-meaning intermediary. Having consented, however, he could only retire to rejoice in such unexpected assistance.

Then two things occurred, almost simultaneously. Sanvitale reported that the grand duchess had capitulated enthusiastically. The reclamation of Parma's ducal orchestra had been a long-cherished dream, and Marie Louise's reaction had been forceful. "All that *Monsieur Le Baron* proposes, he is to have!" she had most uncharacteristically exclaimed, ordering her councilor to begin at once to implement the Paganini designs.

The same week, a communication from Niccolò's Milanese banker, Migone, delicately proposed that he consider lending an unspecified sum to Count Stefano Sanvitale of Parma, a friend of Villa Gaione's former owner. "He possesses the flaw of a genuine aristocrat; he lives beyond his means," wrote the banker. "But the security is good, I am told, and its merits subject to verification. I should be guided by this, in my consid-

erations, rather than by the fact that he has learned about you from the worst possible source, Castellinardo, and surely regards you as a man of bottomless wealth and infinite recklessness.”

Niccolò put the letter down, laughing. Had he expected, this time, an innocent and untangled gift? Had he not always paid, and was he not now prepared to make payment?

He wrote Migone to proceed slowly and to offer definite encouragement.

Frequently reminded by her privy councilor of his recommendation to have Baron Paganini appointed to the administrative commission of the orchestra, the grand duchess finally wrote in her own hand a confirmation that this was being accomplished. Sanvitale had already collected thirty-seven thousand *lire* from Paganini—not directly, for it would have seemed improper to mention so pedestrian a matter, but through the offices of the impartial Migone.

Niccolò's reply to his sovereign was gracious and flowery, replete with pledges that miracles would be accomplished. Perhaps he assumed the orchestra to be her sole concern, as it had become his, for subsequent communications grew increasingly intense in character: wearying, long-winded, and technical.

“Gentlemen of the ducal orchestra, I come to you on a very happy mission,” Sanvitale proclaimed to the unsuspecting “professors” assembled for rehearsal. His hand rested in comradely affirmation on Niccolò's shoulder. “I wish to announce that Baron Paganini has consented to serve as your artistic director and will be in complete charge of all your future efforts. I extend cordial and heart-felt congratulations—” And he wrung Niccolò's hand, smiling unctuously to the bow tapping, stomping, whistling, and applause his statement had called forth.

“I am gratified that you are as happy as I to welcome Baron Paganini,” Sanvitale concluded.

Niccolò was deeply moved. He had been in a fever to take over the orchestral reins, but now he proceeded with sweetness and tact, praising the efforts of the men while privately judging the ensemble a shambles.

He wrote Marie Louise that her orchestra would, in a short time, be prepared to perform the works of all the great symphonic composers, even the mighty Beethoven. At the same time, he authorized Migone to release additional monies, as needed, to a total of one hundred eighty thousand *lire*. He felt certain that Sanvitale would demand the entire amount. It gave him sardonic satisfaction to realize that neither he nor the cavalier count had been prompted by friendship or altruism. That fact gave harmony to life. Consistent self-interest and self-love could be depended upon; they possessed an almost prophetic nature.

The orchestra, of course, would never do, despite ingratiating recitations and exchanges of compliments. To begin with, neither the cembalist nor the concert master was equipped to assume leadership together with his designated duties, as was the custom. The leader had to be an altogether authoritarian and separate figure whose command would be heeded literally and who, alone, might be held responsible for infusing a dead score with life and the power to communicate.

At the second rehearsal, Niccolò grew edgy and sarcastic. The enthusiasm of the musicians had been snuffed out; anxiety, rumors, and a smoldering resentment of the interloper could be sensed. The new concertmaster, clutching a fresh contract emblazoned with the grand duchess's seal, found himself peremptorily demoted. Seven men, some senior members of the orchestra, were sent packing; later, Niccolò arbitrarily invited reinforcements from Parma's military band. He did not bother to procure authorization or to justify himself.

The survivors muttered of tyrants and tyranny, but they played better than ever. Niccolò announced an elaborate system of rewards, punishments, and fines for petty offenses. He analyzed each man's role to the last measure of deportment and responsibility. No one dared smoke in the pit or converse, laugh, or perform pranks. Solemnity descended upon

the orchestra, now held together by hatred and fear. The very air vibrated with mutiny.

Niccolò spent many hours each night incorporating his thoughts and suggestions, some of which had haunted him since the days of *Matilde di Shabran*, into a bold reorganization plan that emerged as a treatise on the orchestra and its leadership. The document, painstakingly copied in his own hand, was presented to Sanvitale for conveyance to the grand duchess. Again, the privy councilor smiled and concurred, but this time it seemed to Paganini that the enchantment was fading. Sanvitale muttered obliquely that Rome had not been built in a day, that one ought to make haste slowly, and that Count Bombelles had expressed some concern over the projected costs. None of these cautions discouraged Niccolò to slow his zeal for reform.

And, by way of vindication, the Christmas concert proved a personal triumph. Difficult, explosive, and grudging as Paganini had been in his new directorial role, the men responded to him as do errant children to a strong hand and will: wanting in affection, perhaps, but with obedience and utter fidelity to his purposes. They whimpered but gave what he demanded of them.

Grand Duchess Marie Louise, wiping her eyes after the *Leonora Overture* and remembering days of greater vitality and less circumscribed splendor, promptly created Paganini a Knight of the Order of Constantine of St. George (his decoration, he recognized happily, was set in diamonds) and presented him a copper-hued Guarneri from the Hapsburg collection. Niccolò also noted with gratitude the absence of Count Bombelles, fortuitously indisposed. His sovereign's generosity might have been somewhat less spontaneous had her consort been present.

But even the felicities of the Christmas Day concert were marred by unhappy rumblings and discord. The musicians felt insecure, as though under a volcanic crater. At stake was their mediocrity, a precious way of life. And Niccolò was nearly smothered by the herd of impresarios, applicants, and all sorts of questionable representatives. Sanvitale, too, had his

favorites and those to whom he seemed mysteriously beholden. It proved complex, Niccolò learned, and often disturbingly unpleasant, to bypass the wishes of the courtier who had made a fine art of affecting acquiescence.

Niccolò labored at his treatise on the modern orchestra, assembled formidable enemies, and tried with accelerating desperation to sell Gaione. But even as he declared himself ready to accept a stupendous loss, no taker appeared. Geremi combed Europe to locate the newly rich and the newly restored, while to Niccolò, he wrote letters assaultive with irony and self-righteousness. He forgot, apparently, that he had brought the availability of the villa to Niccolò's attention in the first place, albeit guardedly and with pleas for prudence.

The case of Carlo Bignami, however, precipitated the actual denouement and terminated Niccolò's brief, harassed career as artistic director of the ducal orchestra. Without fawning for permission or the royal blessing—it had not even occurred to him to do so—Niccolò engaged the young concertmaster of Mantua, a former student of Rolla, for the Parma ensemble. He drew up the contract himself, and Bignami, accepting it in good faith, resigned his position in Mantua.

In receipt of the Bignami contract not previously discussed with him, Sanvitale characteristically suppressed it and awaited the deluge. It followed promptly. Marie Louise instructed her councilor to advertise the vacancy and plan the customary competition to fill the post. The Mantuan, humiliated and outraged, demanded an explanation of Paganini, whom he threatened with litigation. Niccolò quarreled with Sanvitale, who advised him loftily on fine points of protocol and hinted that Bignami was politically unacceptable. Marie Louise could not be reached, and Count Bombelles disapproved of the entire affair and would have none of the mock-baron's officiousness, insubordination, and extravagance.

The deadlock simmered ominously. Niccolò wrote eloquent and exalted letters to the grand duchess and an angry summation of his stance

to the privy councilor, neither of whom chose to reply. When, during the next few weeks, he learned that Marie Louise was in Vienna and Sanvitale was looking about for a new music director, Niccolò peremptorily quit Parma, leaving behind a ruined villa and a miscellany of personal ruins as well.

Chapter Eight: Legitimate!

Back in Genoa, he ascertained that Charlotte had indeed married. The initial announcements had been premature, but the engaging soubrette had, in time, found herself an American husband and was forever lost to him, Achilles, and Gaione.

Verification was like a slow eclipse of the sun: once dead, hope needed mourning and moping. Had Charlotte remained nearby and available, he might have fled to her. But snatched from his presence and now from all remote fantasies of reunion, she became precious beyond endurance, and Niccolò, the languishing adolescent he had never been, pondered his sorrow, calculated his loss, and generalized on the nature of unrequited love.

It had always been native and easeful to surrender to malaise. With the termination of his dream to create a great orchestra and the simultaneous realization that Charlotte had been snatched from him, all constraint crumpled. Niccolò found himself at the mercy of a host of searing agonies, the least of which was a withdrawal of the will to live. He hovered over a seaside cliff; he contemplated with longing the noxious poisons on the apothecaries' shelves and wondered what overdoses of his own detested cures might reverse themselves and prove lethal.

Throughout his travail, Germi hounded him concerning his failure to act in the matter of Achillino's legitimation. "You were, for a time, in the grand duchess's favor," he carped. "She might surely have been very susceptible; she would have wept with compassion. But no—you had to play martinet with a toy orchestra, and now you have become persona non grata in Parma!"

But Niccolò felt little remorse, even though his apprehension for the child's future was so great that he knew he dared not die. It remained his view that Count Bombelles would have blocked the petition, even if it had been presented at the crest of Paganini's brief ascendancy. Bombelles had detested the interloper from the start: his specious patent of nobility,

his spendthrift notions, and his revolting personal history. It would have been futile to seek legitimation in Parma, Niccolò protested.

Unconvinced, Germi conveyed the legitimation plea to Turin, where the situation seemed more promising than in Genoa. In the latter city, the entire affair had come to an absolute standstill when the magistrates demanded a copy of *Madama* Bianchi's marriage certificate. Despite trusted and reliable knowledge that Antonia had become the wife of one Carlo Brunati several years earlier, no one could locate a record of the marriage. The fact that the child had been abandoned by his mother, as the petition so grimly set forth, and that the latter had renounced all legal claim to custody did not seem to interest the magistrates. They demanded additional evidence.

Niccolò took to bed with pique. He developed boils, obstructions, and an inability to retain solid food. He coughed fitfully half the night until his eyeballs felt inflamed and his breastbone ached from the writhing. He was convinced a special malevolence was being directed against him. Legitimation, after all, was a routine process, for centuries rendered easy and uncomplicated by European courts of law as a service to an aristocracy inclined to be careless in scattering its seed. Only for *him* were such complications created.

Like a madman, Niccolò continued to babble of America. With encouragement, he might actually have undertaken the journey, for there remained gold to be gathered. Even if the streets of the New World were not literally paved with that precious metal, the hybrid Americans, starved for good music and anxious to be deemed as civilized as Europeans, paid lavishly to hear the artists who came to their shores. Tales of ridiculous fortunes acquired during American tours by nobodies came continuously to his attention.

"You are greedy," Germi told him. "You will not survive the voyage. They will fling your body into the ocean for the fish to devour. Do you not have enough to eke out some sort of living, Niccolò *mio*?"

"I have sustained terrible losses in Parma," Niccolò protested.

“You have been too impetuous; you did not heed my advice.”

“I am an invalid. I have known the icy fingers of death.”

“But your investments! You have done very well, despite your lack of judgment. Your capital is fruitful, Niccolò.”

“My lungs have rotted away. I am old but have a young child, unprovided for, according to the primitive laws of my beloved homeland.”

“Had you not been playing foolish games with that wretched orchestra of Parma, so that you are now virtually an exile, you might have tended to your own vineyards.”

“The caretaker is a rogue!” Niccolò blazed irrelevantly. “He has been selling Gaione grapes to the neighbors and defrauding me of the orchards as well.”

Germi threw up his hands, convinced that the argument would accomplish nothing, given the incoherent exchanges.

Niccolò became aware that if he were indeed to surmount the miasmas without disintegrating, hope lay only in his violin and in the scope of his remaining energies. Such had always been the case. This fallow period given over to disenchantment and disease had been preceded by many such interludes. There would be others. Yet, even as he longed to establish continuity with his instrument, he recoiled. To perform was a nudity, a terrible exposure; the world would see his sores. True, he would triumph in performance, but they would think him under the sinister black wings of the Demon and proclaim his defection to the world. Happy Jacob, who merely wrestled with an angel. Surely the incandescent creature had displayed only the most infantile wiles, compared with those of Niccolò's Dark Mistress!

He writhed on his bed and suffered emetics and purges. He arose when the feebleness lessened, however briefly, and sought solutions in his bow arm and fingertips. Outrage and self-loathing nibbled away at him with little rats' teeth. “My violin remains out of humor with me,” he laughed to Germi, even while he knew the taste of blood in his mouth and panic gripping his bowels. “Music is an erratic mistress. She must be

conquered anew at each encounter." He postponed the scheduled concert in Turin, fearing men with long memories and sharp ears.

"Dr. Spitzer is in Marseilles. He, alone, can save my life," Niccolò muttered, preparing to depart. "And there are audiences in Marseilles, too, as in Nice." He did not add that they were reputed to be less discriminating than the Turinese; less likely to pounce upon a fleck of evidence that Paganini was no longer Paganini.

For he had been traduced by his own perfection, he came to believe. The superhuman came to be regarded as routine; the miraculous, as possible and expected. That he had sold his soul to diabolical powers was by now an old wives' tale. Omitted from it, alas, or unknown, was the terrifying corollary that he sold it again and again at each separate ordeal and physical setback.

Nothing was natural; nothing was neat; nothing flowed like a pure spring from God's earth, but then, nothing soars on melodic wings supple as the outstretched wings of birds. Antonio Paganini had correctly disciplined his second son for greatness: by beating him brutally and leaving him in solitude to come to terms with himself. There seemed no other way.

Niccolò fought the waning of his powers. He fought himself and lassitude and the fluctuations of desire to see the morrow. He waged war upon the punishments that assaulted his worn, ravaged body. Low, debilitating fevers and high, hallucinatory fevers made parchment of his skin and left his mouth sore, blubbery, and ulcerated. Bizarre afflictions pursued him; he found himself unable to void and suffered the insertion of catheters. Disease gnawed at his manhood; he railed like Oedipus over the errors of his youth.

* * *

Germi dragged him from the coach, while Achillino jumped up and down, clinging to a knee as he descended, then an arm, then his neck, knocking the hat from his head in executing a great bear hug.

"You will tear me to shreds! You know how ill I am after a journey," Niccolò protested happily.

"Good news, good news!" Germi chanted, while the child proclaimed to the world, "I am no longer a little bastard, Father! I am legitimate now."

"Quiet!" cried Niccolò, poking Achillino with his elbow for appearances and almost at the same time exclaiming in an agony of hope and incredulity, "Is it true, Luigi? Is it true?"

"Come into the house. I have many surprises," said Germi.

"Turin! I knew it!" Niccolò gasped, forgetting the misery of his journey. He let Germi's manservant carry everything except the Guarneri del Gesu, which he entrusted to no one, and permitted himself to be led like a sleepwalker into the house.

"Wrong," Germi corrected him. "Our petition continues to await the condescension of the courts of enlightened Turin. They are perhaps angry with you for failing to honor your contract. I am sure many tickets were sold..." He laughed at Niccolò's bewilderment. "No, our document comes from Sardinia!"

"A blessed isle I have yet to visit."

"But the precedent makes it almost inevitable that confirmation be forthcoming from other sources. In fact, not that it is really necessary now, but in view of your extensive holdings, I took the liberty of petitioning Parma."

"A lost cause," Niccolò sighed, flinging himself into a chair and reaching out to his son.

"Scarcely," said Germi. "Confirmation was prompt and uncomplicated. The document arrived this morning. Somewhat conditional, but I think it will do."

"Despite Bombelles?" Niccolò marveled.

"One of the signatories was your 'friend,' Sanvitale. Never underestimate the force of a guilty conscience."

“Yes, yes, a genuine aristocrat. He’d want to repay me for my kindness,” Niccolò conceded satirically.

“Father,” Achillino interrupted. “If a person is legitimate, that means he has both a mother and a father. Is that right?”

“Yes, indeed. You are a wise child, old beyond your years.”

“Well,” continued the boy, “I still see no mother. I’m sure these papers are lying, and I’m not at all legitimate, no matter what you and Uncle Luigi say.”

Niccolò and Germi exchanged looks of utter bewilderment as the child walked serenely into the garden to agitate the goldfish in the little pool.

“Niccolò, *mio*,” Germi began suddenly. His hesitation seemed boyish and bashful; he found himself at an utter loss for words.

“More surprises, Luigi?”

“I’m afraid so. I mean...Camilletta and I are to be married.”

Niccolò stared vacantly at his old friend. “Now? *Now?*” he asked hoarsely.

“It is too late to recapture the years already spent,” answered Germi, shy as a nineteen-year-old bridegroom. He proceeded to outline time-and-place particulars of his plan to marry his housekeeper, who had served him and loved him devotedly for nearly a quarter-century. But all of it made scarcely a particle of sense to Niccolò, who dared not—chastened as he was by loneliness, loss, disease, and the upheaval of his journey—advise his friend that it might be more prudent to wait a little longer (only a *little* longer!), so that one might be truly certain before taking so fatal and irrevocable a step.

* * *

He floundered for meanings; he pondered the impasse in his own life, at once deathly static and wasteful. Time crowded him, but energy, the primal flame, had been extinguished.

And Germi, who had laughed at him, who had called him pure fool of a foolish century, who saw himself a cynic, who viewed the world dispassionately and found it wanting—Germi, who had scoffed at his posturing, his devils, his loves, his sufferings, his heroes—*that* Germi, no other, was to go to the cathedral with his middle-aged housekeeper and declare before God and his fellow creatures that lust had been meaningful and all the lost years good and beautiful...

Incredible. Absolutely incredible! Niccolò tossed on his bed, repulsed envy, and sought sleep.

“Father?”

“Hush, Achillino. It is late.”

“You are very hoarse.”

“It is nothing. It is but a small annoyance from the voyage.”

“You were crying.”

“No, I am far too old. Even you do not cry anymore.”

“Are you glad I am now legitimate?”

“Yes, my child. Very glad.”

“What will you do...now?”

Niccolò spoke with calculated calm. “I shall make my will.”

“Oh,” said the boy. “I thought—”

Niccolò did not inquire about the thought. He waited, suspended and tense, for the regular breathing of deep sleep.

In the morning, he took his coffee opposite the bridegroom, regarding with new respect the silent and complacent Camilletta, who offered them the tiny, steaming cups and delicate sweetmeats. Why, Niccolò thought, she is old; her face is lined; she has a large, brown mole on her neck...Her posture, he noted, was that of a woman of her class worn out by servitude to her betters: one no longer vivacious or ornamental; one retained out of compassion.

“It is because you fear death!” he blurted.

Germi licked the scales of icing from his lips. “What did you say?”

“The marriage...because you fear God’s judgment.”

“Not at all,” Germi laughed. “It is simply because I fear Camilletta,” he continued, and he slapped her ample rump.

“Do not be such an old fool. I shall spill the coffee and scald you. It is very hot,” she threatened, wagging a rough, veined hand.

“I shall delighted to play for the Mass,” Niccolò proposed awkwardly.

“Oh, nothing so fine will be necessary. At the smallest altar, practically at dawn, some fine seminary Latin and the deed is done. What do we want with grandeur? I have become attached to my old woman and must prevent her from running off with a younger and more virile man!”

“Idiot!” smiled Camilletta.

Niccolò pressed his offer, terrified by the notion of being a spectator to the celebration. “I should be delighted, Luigi. We have been friends since boyhood.”

Germi grinned slyly. “Out of the question. The bride brings me a most meager dowry, so I have little cause for rejoicing. As a matter of fact, I shall now be obliged, under peril of eternal damnation, to feed her twice as much!”

Less than a week later, Niccolò and Achillino attended the quaint nuptials. The church was empty, save for four awed, country relatives of Camilletta and Luigi’s only sister, who wept and wrung her hands. The ceremony was brief and unceremonious, even as the bridegroom had promised. The young priest mumbled in a nasal falsetto as though struggling to keep awake. Camilletta sniffed a few times, possibly because the incense, lavishly liberated by a dull acolyte, made her want to sneeze.

Luigi seemed content, sated, tender, and not at all overwhelmed by the pronouncement that rendered sacramental his forthcoming relationship with Camilletta (and forgave the indignities of the past).

As for Niccolò, he remembered terms of the Satanic pact that apparently remained in force, even after he had rid himself of the Succubus. He also relived the grief of love’s evanescence and the loss of love...yet shivered with dread at the enormity of an act as shattering and final as death itself: wedlock.

Chapter Nine: Paganini's Last Will

The will...One made a will, so the saying had it, as the worldly portion of preparing oneself for eternity. Possessions first; then, at the end, one's immortal soul. Part of Christian ritual and obligation, no doubt: one disposed of acquisitions or designated new owners or provided for the indigent and the orphaned. Finally, the burden shed, one kept his pact with the Devil or commended his soul to his Maker, whichever seemed applicable.

Luigi laughed and informed his rhetorical friend that there was no basis in reality for any connection between a last will and testament, on the one hand, and the death rattle. The relationship was wholly mythical, existing in Niccolò's foolish mind (and in many other foolish minds). As a matter of fact, most fools died intestate as a result of their prejudices. One could postpone indefinitely the formulation of such a document, but one could not hope to ward off one's fate by means of such a postponement. When the sand had run out of the hourglass...He, for one, had never heard of a man living an hour longer as a result of his refusal to make a will. His advice to Niccolò was to get to the point without further procrastination. A legal will would leave him no nearer the grave than he already found himself.

Niccolò queried and queried, risking his friend's ridicule and irony, and childishly demanding proof of Geremi that he, too, had executed such a document. The indecisiveness that had thwarted all his ventures in their beginnings—the difficulty of breaking free of patronage, the delays that attended his quitting Italy to conquer the world, the ambivalence that had stalemated love and personal loyalties (or was at least *somewhat* to blame)—now returned to plague him. However, indecisiveness was attended by a sick fear of death; as though, in settling his accounts with the living, there would be nothing left to deter him from giving up the ghost.

Logically, he understood his reluctance and the irrational fear that attended it. He was unused to acting forthrightly. Either he persevered so relentlessly that he half forgot his goal in the pursuit of it, or he survived each necessity to act by means of an excruciating suspension of will, punished in advance for gain and experiencing loss over and over again before it occurred.

Niccolò hounded himself, yet wallowed in numbness and inertia. Consideration of his assets brought only melancholy, yet his assets were in order and flourishing. Germi's sarcasm precipitated waves of resentment, humiliation, and rage. In the end, it was Achillino who called his hand, having inquired wistfully whether he would one day be without both a mother and a father.

"Oh, no," gasped Niccolò, while Germi calmly explained, "That is likely. It is quite proper for a boy to outlive both his parents."

The child stifled tears and hugged his father, and Niccolò at last felt the torpor beginning to crack, though slowly.

* * *

He was an embarrassingly rich man. Germi tried to explain investment: the inevitable and wise ballooning of money. Wealth, properly bred, makes more wealth, just as a single pair of parents may breed children and grandchildren. Even static wealth, sitting safely, manages to increase and grow fat.

He might leave Achillino his entire fortune, a simple and uncomplicated gesture. It dissatisfied him. Perhaps envy: the thought that he, the donor, had come into the world naked and penniless, and had had to bite, claw, and scratch a path to achievement and affluence? It did not really matter what precisely deterred him from writing a "sample" will. His family obligations, perhaps? Germi's raised eyebrows? The memories that pressed upon raw nerves...or perhaps the realization that Achillino would be a rich and powerful man (and a baron of sorts) with even half of the existing Paganini assets?

Antonia: could she sue? Would she, learning of his death assert her motherhood, move sentimental magistrates to tears, and claim she had been denied her rights? A possibility, Germi conceded. The Viennese documents would scarcely be upheld in Italian courts as binding and final, and the devilish reputation Niccolò enjoyed might add eloquence to the pleas of his erstwhile mistress.

Niccolò fumed. Would not the swift, subsequent marriage of Antonia Bianchi be proof of her lack of interest in him and her son? On the contrary, Germi replied. According to Italian tradition, marriage erases all sexual transgressions. The fact that a good man (and what man, before the altar, is less than good?) elected to marry the tarnished Antonia made her a pure, worthy, and reputable woman. The sacrament of marriage is redemptive, making a Mary out of a Magdalene. Who should know better than he? Why, Camilletta, having eschewed the confessional for a quarter-century or so, now had a weekly agenda for that hideous little priest from the Abruzzi.

Niccolò tormented himself, resisting, conceding, and dashing to Germi in the middle of the night to change his mind yet once again. Did an impure woman, he demanded to know, *deserve* to be rewarded? Germi laughed. What was a “pure” woman? A bluestocking? One who had borne him no children? One who refused to be bedded with him? The law and the Church, while severe and surely more explicit than he, would probably view Antonia’s cause with greater charity than his own. Luigi suggested a small, additional annuity with definite conditions attached. This might persuade her to keep away from the boy—a situation she probably found convenient in any event, since no reformed courtesan likes being confronted with the issue of her indiscretion.

However, Niccolò reasoned after many pauses and false starts, if he now bribed and rewarded his erstwhile mistress (who had but exploited him), why should he not leave something to one who had loved him exclusively and chastely?

“We are back at the beginning,” Germi yawned. “Struggling over the monumental problem of chastity? I cannot recall ever encountering a chaste woman, Niccolò, and I thank God for it. Whom did you have in mind?”

“Eleonora Quillici, for one.”

“For *one*! You are fortunate. And which of your innumerable *in-amarate*, may I ask, was this Eleonora Quillici?”

“I knew the family in my youth—in Lucca.”

“The little seamstress who never married, to whom we send a few soldi from time to time? I see; I see. She has, then remained a vestal virgin, poor soul, consecrated to the great god, Paganini.”

“Don’t be repulsive, Luigi! I should like to leave her a small income, that she may never want. She is surely lonely and poor, and perhaps she will one day be unable to work.”

“That is generous of you. I had no idea that you loved this Eleonora. I thought her a distant relative, perhaps.”

Niccolò corrected him gently. “I did not love her. She loved me, which is more important.”

“I do not think so,” Germi demurred, “though the point may well be argued both ways.”

“It has been important to me, though for reasons I can never explain fully. Suffice it to say that is of consequence to be loved for no reason: not because one is rich; not because one transmits pleasures; not because one is Paganini.”

“The mad baroness?” Germi blurted. He waited for the flush of rage and distaste on his friend’s gaunt features to subside, and then continued guardedly. “She left her husband, her father, and her faith. She journeyed to our native land. She has spent many years wandering—and in a convent, and in a madhouse. She continues to write you fondly, demanding nothing for herself.”

"I did not expect such sacrifices," Niccolò stated coldly, "and I do not propose to reward her recklessness and bad taste. Besides, she has no need of money."

"A small gift, perhaps: a pretty bauble; a locket; a ring? It will provide great happiness."

"No!" Niccolò snapped. "She is...*hochgeboren*."

"You have never forgiven her that."

"Let it be as you say. I have never forgiven her."

"Martyrs must die to earn our respect," Germi observed. He shuffled documents. "And now to the truly joyous part: your natal family."

Paganini groaned. "How can one not outrage them?"

"How can one divide Solomon's baby?"

"If the trust funds—yes, Luigi, I must—are not identical, they will tear one another to shreds, but how can I be fair to all? Nicoletta has been deserted by her husband, whereas Domenica's spouse will outlive us all. And there are the children, my nieces and nephews."

"Use your good head and let them squabble if they must."

"All else, including Gaione—arrange for the documents, my good Luigi—go to my son, Achilles, Cyrus Alexander. Except—"

"Except?"

"No," said Niccolò. "You have prohibited it."

"Yes. I have accepted your gift of ten thousand *lire*, and I prohibit further nonsense on your part. I shall clearly exclude myself in the text of your will."

"But you will continue to help and counsel Achillino?"

"As though he were my own son."

"I forbid all funereal pomp."

"Do not flatter yourself. You may yet drown at sea."

"No gathering of artists, no requiem at which each will try a different cadenza—"

"Of course not, you vile unbeliever."

“No,” Niccolò said calmly. “They play badly, that is all.” He hesitated. “Masses? I shall need them, I fear. I am very unclear as to my wishes. What do you think?”

“That it will look proper,” Germi replied, smiling. “A hundred or so, by the Capuchins, those hooded thieves. What do you have to lose?”

Niccolò shuddered. A spurt of confusion and conflict welled up in him, flickered, and soon died down. His breathing seemed to carry a swishing sound; maybe he alone could hear it or imagine that he did.

“My violin, my cannon,” he announced. “Perhaps the city of Genoa will keep it in memory of her son.”

“A capital idea!” Germi agreed. “But Niccolò, old friend, you are white as ash and look as though you are about to give up the ghost this minute out of sheer fright. Believe me, there are respectable merchants here in Genoa who perform this rite every year or so: whenever they quarrel with a son; whenever a grandchild is born; whenever the chambermaid produces a mysterious little promontory. And they live on and on, to everyone’s consternation.”

Niccolò listened dully. The thunderclap and the forked lightning that streaked the window were not emanations of sooty clouds hanging over the harbor. The creatures of Darkness who ruled over him were displeased; his old Satanic Mistress screamed that no end of Masses, pieties, or virtuous bequests would shelter Paganini from the ultimate reckoning.

* * *

I hope you have enjoyed these sections from the original manuscript by Ann Abelson. *Paganini Agitato* has been released by Fomite Press and is available through their website and other retail outlets.

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A Slow Train to Budapest

A Slow Train To Budapest

Standalone

Excerpts from the Original Manuscript: Paganini Agitato

