



**It will perhaps take
the reader a few pages
to find out what this
quite sharp story it's all about.
But as soon as he realizes
what's happening, he will be
hooked up until the final,
disconcerting surprise.
As I was.**

(Arrigo Boito, 1842-1918)

A personal foreword to this story about OTHMAN – METELLO

This short story was conceived and then written directly in English. If I remember correctly, it was early in the 1990's. And there was a reason for it.

During the previous twenty (20) years I lived and worked in several English-speaking countries. Obviously English was then my main and only language, both in my private life and in my working life. Seldom, if ever, I spoke Italian during all those years. I was teaching in English, my academic papers were all written in English and in English –*helas, with a sort of pervasing Italian accent*- I spoke every day with friends, students, colleagues, acquaintances and lovers.

Then I returned to Italy and for the following twenty (20) years I fell back to speaking Italian again. As it was my mother language, it came back easily to me, together with the sweet old dialect of my youth. Seldom, if ever, I spoke English during all these years. When, out of boredom and dispair, I started to write some entertaining short stories, just to amuse myself and my local friends, it was quite natural for me to write in Italian. But then some of my old overseas friends and (*previous*) lovers and acquaintances complained loudly: they didn't know Italian but wanted to know what amused me so much. So I decided to write at least one special short story, just for them. In English, of course.

THIS ONE.

As you can guess, the idea came to me from the tale of a well known Shakespearian character but *-as usual-* I turned things upside down, just for fun. To make it somewhat more interesting, titillating and a little fizzling, I gathered up all my knowledge of colourful, resonant and even a trifle effete old English language and mixed all up. This strange story is the result. You don't have to read it, because surely it's not everybody's pie. But if you think you are up to the challenge, there is a good chance that you'll eventually enjoy it.

Surely it will surprise you. Till the end

P.S. Clearly Arrigo Boito was referring to some other story. But his quote fitted so well to this one...

THE MISERABLE STORY OF OTHMAN-METELLO THE MOOR OF VENICE IN CYPRUS



The Most Serene Republic of Venice was not faring well during the last quarter of the 16th century. Confined at the top of one of the innermost gulfs within the Mediterranean sea, she had found herself cut out from the new - and extremely profitable - trade with both the West and the East Indies recently developed over the Atlantic Ocean. Her merchant vessels were not sturdy enough and not sufficiently rigged to stand the the huge rolling waves and the fierce winds of the Atlantic. Her pilots lagged behind in the techniques of open sea navigation and in the modern use of compass. It has always been easy to get lost at sea. So, traditionally, sailors had always skirted the land with an eye on its reassuring marks. But during the previous century a new brand of Atlantic pilots had learned to brave the featureless surface of the great Ocean, an extremely daring adventure that paid enormous dividends to their countries. In the Mediterranean, shipmasters still were hedging around the coast, or at most hopping from island to island, to reach their destination.

• **Most Serene** = Serenissima • **was not faring well** = non si trovava in buone condizioni (lett. = non viaggiava bene, to fare = viaggiare) • **one of the innermost gulfs within the Mediterranean sea** = uno dei golfi più interni del Mar Mediterraneo (cioé l'Adriatico) • **West and East Indies** = le Indie Occidentali (in America) e le Indie Orentali (India ed Estremo Oriente) • **sturdy** = robusti • **not sufficiently rigged** = senza velatura adeguata (to rig = armare una nave) • **lag-**

ged behind = non si erano tenuti al corrente (*to leg* = restare indietro) • **compass** = bussola • **skirted the land** = costeggiato la terraferma (*skirt* = gonna, ma anche bordo) • **to brave** = ad affrontare • **shipmasters** = capitani di navi • **hedging around the coast** = seguire la costa (*hedge* = siepe, liea costiera) • **hopping** = saltando a balzi (*to hop* = saltellare) •

Moreover, for protection the Venetian Republic only had galleys, long warships still equipped with oars and overloaded with soldiers for boarding tactics. They could not compete with the new Atlantic galleons, much bigger, fully sailed and heavily manned with guns. These big ships were good for war and trade together and could fire so low that their shots went skimming over the water with deadly accuracy even on long distance. Ever thrifty, if not actually stingy, Venice had found too high the capital investments necessary for the transition to the new ways of sea trade and to the most recent techniques of naval warfare. It was a penny-wise and a pound-foolish policy, obviously, of which most of her many wealthy senators, glittering bankers and affluent merchants were not sufficiently aware. By persisting in her own traditional ways, using manpower instead of sails or cannons (men seemed cheaper, at the beginning), and by sticking to the old Mediterranean routes, the Most Serene Republic found herself outclassed in less than eighty years. Yet, she still was an extremely wealthy power, controlling wide financial transactions and the flow of credit up to German states and Polish grandees. Her industries were still thriving, producing highly paid luxury goods and large quantities of textiles, glass, furniture and other wares. She still had a near monopoly over the vast import and export trade with all the Levantine markets. But here too she was gradually losing control.

galleys = galee o galere (basse navi da guerra a remi e a due alberi con vele latine) ••• **galleons** = galeoni (robuste navi mercantili e da guerra, a bordo alto e con quattro alberi, due ad ampie vele quadrate e due a vele latine) • **manned with gun** = dotate di cannoni (*to man* = equipaggiare) • **went skimming** = passavano radenti (*to skim* = scremare, ma anche rasentare) • **ever thrifty** = sempre parsimoniosa • **a penny-wise and a pound-foolish policy** = una politica di risparmio sui dettagli ma di sperpero sui grandi progetti (lett. = che, per voler risparmiare un centesimo, finisce con lo spendere una sterlina) • **glittering bankers** = brillanti banchieri (*to glitter* = scintillare) ••• **Polish grandees** = la nobiltà polacca ••• **thriving** = prospere (*to thrive* = prosperare) • **Levantine** = levantini, delle regioni conosciute oggi come Asia Minore •

For centuries Venetian dominance over the Eastern Mediterranean was underpinned by direct military possession of a scattered network of many strategic locations on the Greek islands. It also kept a series of small strongholds along the coast of Turkey, from Constantinople to Syria. When the remnants of the weak Byzantine Empire were swept away by the new power of the Ottoman Turks, Venice too started to lose ground. Bit by bit, the Turks took

away her possessions. Most of the islands were by now under Ottoman rule. In 1571, moreover, after a long, bloody and memorable siege of its main fortress-town of Famagusta, even Cyprus had to be cleared, the prized domain and one of the pivots of the Venetian empire in the East. In that period the Turks were a very active and aggressive power on the world scene, with a well organized state, a disciplined and excellently equipped army as well as a forceful ruling class. We should not think of their decadent and backward successors of the times of the late Ottoman Empire. Under the leadership of a string of capable and resourceful sultans, in those two hundred years the Turkish army had conquered Constantinople, annexed all of Greece and subdued the whole Balkan region including the kingdom of Hungary. Already the Caucasus region, Crimea, Persia, Egypt, all had come under direct Turkish rule and the Barbary states of North Africa had become their satellites.

• **underpinned** = puntellato • **strongholds** = piazzeforti • **Bizantine Empire** = già da duecento anni i Turchi avevano conquistato Costantinopoli (1453) mettendo così fine agli ultimi brandelli dell'Impero Bizantino • **pivots** = cardini • **siege** = assedio • **a string of...sultans** = una sequela (lett. un filo) di sultani • **Barbary** = Barbaria (nome dato alle regioni della costa nordafricana, dall'odierna Libia all'Algeria) •

The Turkish army was one of the most advanced military forces of the world of that time. It pioneered the tactical use of field artillery, for instance, and in the plains of Kossovo decimated by deadly gunfire the still medieval warriors from Serbia, Bosnia and Albania. Later, at the bloody battle of Mohacs, it definitively outgunned the Hungarian heavy cavalry. The Christian West was somewhat able to stem its headway only under the walls of Vienna in 1529. On the seas, a desperate war effort by Venice, together with the naval forces of Spain, the Pope, the Granduchy of Tuscany and the Holy Order of Malta kept in check the successful Turkish expansion with the famous battle of Lé-panto, in 1571.

“The infidels have only singed my beard. It can grow again, but they will surely cry for it” reportedly said the ruling Sultan, Selim the Second, after Lé-panto. However, it was only Venice that had to pay dearly for that day of victory. The Turkish fleet intensified the attacks against her last few strongholds in the East. By now, only Cándia (or Crete, as we call it today) remained to them, together with small garrisons on few islands, like Cérigo, Scàrpanto, Castelrósso as well as Agrocástro, a fortress at the tip of the Akamàntos peninsula, on the north-western Cypriot coast, not far away from the remains of the old Greek town of Pàphos.

Kòssovo = piana tra la Serbia meridionale e le montagne dell'Albania (dove l'armata turca nel 1389 sgominò i Serbi cristiani, sottomettendoli) • **Mohacs** = località ungherese (dove avvenne la battaglia in cui nel 1526 i Turchi sconfisserò sanguinosamente la cavalleria ungherese, facendo dell'Ungheria uno stato vassallo) • **outgunned** = spazzato via a cannonate • **to stem its headway** = fermare il suo progresso • **singed** = bruciacchiato • **Lépanto** = grande battaglia navale sulle coste greche (in cui le congiunte flotte cristiane della Spagna di Carlo V, del Papa Pio V, del Granduca di Toscana Cosimo I de' Medici e dell'Ordine di Malta, comandate dal giovane don Giovanni d'Austria, figlio naturale di Carlo V, riuscirono a sconfiggere l'armata turca di Mehmet Ali che puntava verso l'Italia) • **kept in check** = contennero • **Selim II** = sultano dal 1566 al 1574 • **Cerigo, Scarpanto** = le odierne isole greche di Citéra (a sud del Peloponneso) e Càrpatos (tra Creta e Rodi) • **Castelrosso** = piccola isola presso la costa turca, a est di Rodi (oggi Castelòrizos) • **Cypriot coast** = la costa cipriota, dell'isola di Cipro •

Agrocástro was the most isolated of these Venetian outposts in the Eastern Mediterranean. But it still had a certain importance to the government of the Most Serene Republic, which hung to it tenaciously. It happened that the main sailing route connecting Constantinople and Egypt - via the island of Rhodes - ran nearly at sighting distance from the western coast of Cyprus, where Agrocastro was located. The Venetians used this place mainly as a convenient lookout, from which to keep a wary eye on the passing Levantine sea traffic, trying to figure out the main intentions of the Turkish fleets. Agrocastro was the last shred of territory that the Republic still controlled on the island of Cyprus and it was a small possession indeed: a puny castle built some centuries before by the Crusader Knights of the Saint Simeon, perched on the leeward side of a stony peninsula and overlooking a diminutive fishing harbour. It was a not well preserved fortress, quite old in its structure. Recently, the Venetian Government had added some battlements and a few ramparts for their artillery. Agrocastro's gun park consisted of four middle size bombards of cast iron and a dozen bronze culverines and demi-culverines. It was not an impressive fire power, perhaps, but sufficient to keep away undesirable visitors. The original fortress had been built with large slabs of whitish local limestone, from which it got its name. Agrocastro, in fact, was the Venetian rendition of its original Greek name: *Argyro-kástron*, the Silver Castle, because during most nights it shone white in the moonlight. Even from the deck of far away ships it could be seen, shimmering above the waves.

• **outposts** = avamposti • **Rhodes** = Rodi • **lookout** = osservatorio • **shred** = brandello • **puny** = sparuto • **the Crusader Knights of Saint Simeon** = i cavalieri crociati di San Simeone (*fictional in this story*) • **perched on the leeward side** = aggrappato alla parte sottovento • **battlements** = bastioni • **ramparts** = baluardi • **gun park** = batteria di cannoni • **bombards of cast iron** = mortai in ghisa • **culverines** = colubrine, piccoli cannoni in bronzo lunghi e sottili • **slabs of ... limestone** = lastre di calcare • **deck** = ponte (di nave) • **shone white** = brillava (di

luce) bianca • **shimmering** = tremolante (*to shimmer* = brillare tremolando, proprio della luce sull'acqua) •

The rest of the peninsula, some miles long, was also of limestone and rather hilly. It was all layered by hundreds of little stone terraces, patiently built by generation after generation of hardy Cypriot peasants. Since antiquity they used the terraces to grow their small vineyards, their olive groves and their patchy fields of millet or wheat. There were no more than three or four pocket-sized villages of poor whitewashed houses on the peninsula, which constituted the whole territory ruled by the Venetian garrison, a territory so unimportant that the Turks never bothered to take over. Nor could Agrocastro offer much as a haven, because its little port could not take in more than one galley at a time, besides a few local fishing boats, and then only by difficult maneuvering. Any other ship would, by necessity, be left anchored outside the limited shelter of the tiny harbour, and so be continuously harassed by extremely strong winds in summer and by routine bad weather in winter. As the nearby cliffs were lined with a sharp reef with protruding rocks, that harbourage offered more danger than shelter. Hence, Agrocastro was of little value to the Venetian fleet as a suitable base for raids against the Turkish sea lanes. The Turks never worried too much about being watched by that small Venetian outpost. Actually, they liked to be seen. Sometimes, without warning, they paraded their warships along the coast of Cyprus at the most inconvenient hours, throwing the scant Venetian garrison into utter confusion and creating unnecessary, sudden panic.

• **layered** = punteggiato (lett. = stratificato, *layer* = strato) • **patchy** = irregolari (lett= rattoppato, *to patch*) • **millet** = miglio • **pocket-size** = minuscoli (lett. che stanno in tasca (*pocket*)) • **whitewashed** = bianchi di calce (*to withewash* = dare la calce = lett. lavare di bianco) • **haven** = rifugio, porto • **maneuvering** = manovrare • **harassed** = bersagliate (*to harass* = molestare) • **routine** = abituale • **reef** = scogliera • **harbourage** = ancoraggio • **hence** = quindi • **sea lanes** = vie di mare • **outpost** = avamposto • **paraded** = sfilavano in parata (*to parade*) • **scant** = scarsa • **utter** = completo •

The Venetian garrison at Agrocastro was rather small. Altogether there were in the castle no more than eighty soldiers with some officers, plus a cook, a priest and a prostitute, all in the pay of the Republic. Many of the men were not even Venetian subjects, but freelance servicemen from several Italian and German principalities. Nearly a dozen were Slavs from the Dalmatian coast, the terribly mustachioed Uskocs. There were also a few poor Greek

mercenaries and even a couple of renegade Turks, not an unusual occurrence in those days - to be fair, we should remember that an even larger number of renegade Christians were working in the Sultan's pay. Some of the men were just cannon-fodder, others were professional soldiers, pikemen, musketeers, gunmen, sappers. Some had been driven to that isolated garrison by desperate personal stories or by the need of pay, but mostly had reached that wretched place by pure chance. The garrison's cook, for instance, happened to be a somber native from the New World, a true *indio* from the forests of Brazil. This savage could not communicate in any comprehensible language and had never understood where on earth he had been taken or what his white masters really wanted from him, after he had been forcibly baptized with the name of Pelagónio. They made him cook, although he could not truly fathom the mysteries of European eating habits and cuisine. In spite of that, he applied himself to his responsibilities, still so enormously puzzling to him, for stewing, baking, roasting, braising, frying, boiling and sauce-making with almost mystical enthusiasm. In his ignorance, the *indio* Pelagonio turned out to be a pretty good cook after all. The men savoured the food so unpredictably prepared by him, although small mistakes were inevitable - his tendency to serve iced fruit sorbets garnished with chicken liver, for instance, while some of his best earthy soups were flavoured with floor polish.

• **freelance servicemen** = soldati indipendenti, cioè mercenari professionisti (lett. = lance libere e quindi disponibili) • **Slavs** = Slavi • **terribly mustachioed** = orrendamente baffuti (*mustache* = baffo) • **Uskocs** = Uscocchi (così venivano allora chiamate le popolazioni croate e bosniache dell'interno della costa dalmata) • **renegade** = rinnegati • **cannon-fodder** = carne (lett. = mangime) da cannone • **pikemen** = lancieri (*pike* = picca) • **gunmen** = cannonieri • **sappers** = zappatori, cioè genieri (*to sap* = scalzare, scavare una trincea) • **wretched** = disgraziato • **somber** = chiuso, taciturno • **indio** = nativo americano • **where on earth** = dove mai (lett. = dove sulla terra...) • **to fathom** = capire a fondo, penetrare • **eating habits** = abitudini di tavola (qui col senso di cibo tipico) • **puzzling** = enigmatiche (*to puzzle*) • **braising** = brasare (*to braise*) • **turned out to be** = si dimostrò di essere • **savoured** = gustavano • **unpredictably** = imprevedibilmente • **ice fruit sorbets garnished with chicken liver** = sorbetti di frutta guarniti con fegatini di pollo • **earthy soups** = zuppe caserecce • **floor polish** = cera da pavimento •

On the contrary, both the priest and the prostitute of the garrison were among the few true-blood Venetians. Father Alvise, the priest, was also a compulsive thief. He preferred to steal money, although he did not snub his nose at pocketing anything he could sell for money. Eventually ecclesiastical authorities resorted to giving him an overseas appointment. But not before he had already embezzled the full contents of a series of parish coffers in Venice and in the Venetian hinterland and relieved several churches in his care of most

of their gold and silver furnishings. Nobody knew what he was doing with the money, as he had no open vice or weakness or depravity. He was a small man, sober, chaste, lamb-like, with a round, soft face, a rather fat neck, and exquisite hands. Besides being a compulsive thief, Father Alvisè was also a very conscientious and dutiful priest, rather pious and sincerely mindful of the eternal salvation of the souls of his flock.

Also quite professional in her duties was the only tart operating locally, Bianca by name. She too was conscientious in her work and worked very hard, because she was trying to put away sufficient funds for her old age, without realizing, poor wench, that she had already passed superannuation by several years. In spite of her endurance, decades of backbreaking work had taken their toll: the old damsel was by now a wreck, thin and haggard, with a sallow complexion and badly dyed hair sprouting white at the root. Her undersized frame was ravaged by recurrent syphilitic infections, which she spread with equanimity among all the garrison men. Her only vanity, an innocent romantic weakness, was to be called “Biancospino”, the Hawthorn Bush, but the men, with equally innocent romanticism, preferred to call her “La BucòNero”, the Black Hole Woman.

• **true-blood Venetians** = veneziani puro sangue • **a compulsive thief** = un irrimediabile ladro • **he did not snub his nose** = non disdegnò (lett. = non storcèva il naso) • **eventually** = alla fine • **resorted to** = trovarono il modo di • **embezzled** = si era appropriato ••• **parish coffers** = casse parrocchiali • **the Venetian hinterland** = l'entroterra veneto • **gold and silver furnishings** = arredi d'oro e di argento • **mindful** = coscienzioso • **flock** = gregge • **tart** = puttana • **put away** = risparmiare • **poor wench** = poveraccia, povera diavola • **superannuation** = limite d'età • **endurance** = resistenza • **backbreaking work** = lavoro massacrante (lett. = che rompe la schiena) • **damsel** = donzella • **a wreck** = un disastro (lett.= un naufragio) • **haggard** = sparuta • **a sallow complexion** = una carnagione terrea • **badly dyed hair sprouting white at the root** = capelli maltinti che mostravano (lett. =germogliavano) il bianco alla radice • **undersized frame** = corporatura minuta • **ravaged** = devastata •

The garrison's commander at Agrocastro was a Venetian nobleman with an unusual background. Don Metello Scavolin was the adopted son of the famous Cardinal Scavolin, a leading Venetian diplomat of that time and one of the pillars of the Counter-Reformation at the Council of Trento. Don Metello was a tall, dark man in his early 30s, with jet-black curly hair and a short curly beard. He sported an aristocratically hooked nose like an eagle's beak, of which he was very proud. Without being good-looking, Don Metello was sufficiently attractive, especially to women, with his beady eyes, narrow cheekbones and full scarlet lips that gave him a ravaging and lustful look. Most men instinctively found his features disturbingly aggressive, but women were often

taken by his predacious, slightly exotic appearance. As a matter of fact, Don Metello had a quite exotic origin. He was born Othmàn ibnMassóud ibnYàhya allaythi, third son of the Emir Massóud ibnYàhya ibnUthmàn arRahàwi, better known all over the Barbary Coast as the Lizard King, because of widespread psoriasis. His father was the powerful ruler of Tlemcèn and the coast around Oran, in what is now Algeria. Othman was only twelve when his father died and his elder step-brother, heir to the throne, swiftly eliminated every other possible pretender in the family. One of his brother, however, was able to escape, taking with him the boy Othman. After an adventurous run, they took refuge among the mountain clan of their mother's family. But gold proved to be stronger than blood. So, the elders of the clan sold back the two youngsters to the new Emir for a conspicuous sum, plus a herd of 600 white goats as an extra gift. While being brought to Tlemcen, an old and faithful guard allowed the two princes to escape again. The young Othman, being small, got away by hiding in the thick thorny underbush, while his brother was easily recaptured and brought back to Tlemcen, where immediately he was blinded and duly castrated. Only then his step-brother, the Emir, mercifully allowed him to spend the rest of his life in the *harem*, where he could do harm no more. For some time the boy Othman wandered alone through the eastern mountains, running into hiding at the slightest suspicion of danger and eating what he could. He no longer trusted a soul but at least his eyes and his young testicles were intact. Eventually the boy tried to reach on foot the boundaries of Morocco, whose King was a distant relation on his mother's side. One day he overheard some shepherds saying that the king of Morocco recently had been deposed and eliminated, while all his sons had to take refuge with the Infidels in Portugal. Hopeless on all other account, and by now dressed only in rags, the lonely princeling started to walk towards Céuta, then a possession of the Spanish Crown on the Barbary Coast.

• **pillars** = pilastri • **Counter-Reformation** = Controriforma (reazione della Chiesa di Roma allo sviluppo del Protestantismo in Europa e che ebbe il suo culmine nel Concilio di Trento, tenutosi dal 1545 al 1563) • **jet-black** = nerissimi (*jet* = giaietto) • **curly** = ricciuta • **hooked nose** = naso aquilino ••• **beady** = penetranti (*bead* = mirino) • **a ravaging and lustful look** = un aspetto devastantemente sensuale • **Barbary Coast** = Costa di Barbaria (corrispondente all'odierna costa algerina e tunisina) • **the Lizard King** = il Re Ramarro • **psoriasis** = malattia squamosa della pelle • **Tlemcen** = un tempo capitale di un Emirato in quella che oggi è l'Algeria • **swiftly** = rapidamente • **pretender** = pretendente • **Emir** = Emiro • **thick thorny underbush** = fitta macchia spinosa • **duly** = debitamente ••• **harem** = stanze riservate alle donne musulmane, vietate agli estranei • **running into hiding** = correndo a nascondersi • **no longer trusted a soul** = non si fidava più di anima viva • **Morocco** = denominazione inglese del Marocco • **dressed only in rags** = coi vestiti ridotti a stracci • **princeling** = principino ••• **Ceuta** = ancor oggi possesso spagnolo sulla costa del Marocco •

Once in town Othman was immediately recognized, by a strange twist of fate, by merchants who used to frequent his father's palace. They took him to the Spanish governor, who treated him with the utmost courtesy, recognizing him as the rightful pretender to the Emirate of Tlemcen. For some months the young Othman lived as a honoured guest at the governor's table, until one day two professional assassins, hired by his step-brother who was ruling in Tlemcen, tried to cut his throat. Then the King of Spain, Philip II, who did not want to lose a valuable pawn in the Moorish geo-political game, arranged for the young pretender to be transferred directly to the safety of Spain. Othman was sent to Granada, where he lived on a royal pension, full of gratitude for his new protector, the King. He was also put into the care of two old Mozarabic teachers, to further his education as the possible future Emir of Tlemcen under Spanish patronage. The two kind old men loved and spoiled the boy, until one day Othman, who was rather fussy with his food, did not like the taste of a lentil soup. He gave it to his dog, who died convulsive in a very short time. The two teachers did confess that they were in the pay of the present Emir and were quietly strangled with their own gray beards. Granada no longer being secure, the prince was now secretly transferred to Barcelona and provided with sturdy Spanish bodyguards, as well as a small army of Spanish teachers for a safer, less murderous education.

• **a strange twist of fate** = uno strano gioco del destino • **with the utmost courtesy** = con suprema cortesia • **Philip II** = Filippo II (figlio di Carlo V, regnò in Spagna e sulle Fiandre dal 1556 al 1598) • **a valuable pawn** = una pedina preziosa • **Moorish** = moresco (degli stati arabi d'Africa) • **the ... geo-political game** = il gioco geo-politico • **Mozarabic** = spagnoli d'origine araba • **patronage** = protezione • **spoiled** = viziarono • **rather fussy** = piuttosto schizzinoso • **lentil soup** = minestra di lenticchie • **convulsive** = in convulsione • **sturdy Spanish bodyguard** = robusta guardia del corpo spagnola •

While in Barcelona, Othman applied himself to his studies, although with indifferent results. He was surely not stupid, but he did not have a bright, inquisitive mind. Books were not among his preferences. Riding, shooting dice, or other more trivial business were more attractive to him. Nevertheless, he somewhat felt the need to get more acquainted with the Infidels' culture. Since his step-brother's many treacherous attempts at wiping him off the face of the earth, he had developed an ingrained mistrust in anything Moslem. The young Othman was starting to find more and more alluring all the trappings of the much safer -at least for him- Christian world. He would have even considered converting to Christianity, had somebody suggested it. Nobody ever

did, for the simple reason that a Christian pretender to a fanatically Moslem Emirate would not have carried much weight. Philip II of Spain was a devout bigot, always burning with a ferocious zeal for the mass Christianization of all his wild New World indios as well as all the Jews and Muslims still left in his kingdom - obviously without asking their consent. That notwithstanding, he understood quite well the subtle political reasons for keeping Salvation-through-Holy-Baptism away from a willing young Moor, should the guy have even a small chance of being planted as a puppet ruler in the neighbouring Moslem land. About two years later, his trusty Spanish barber tried to kill Othman. Luckily, his hand was too shaky and the young man was barely able to escape with his life. The Emir of Tlemcen was proving to be extremely reluctant to leave alive any pretender to his throne. Consequently, the young Othman, by now 18, had to be whisked off to Rome, where he would live under an assumed name.

• **shooting dice** = giocare a dadi • **trivial business** = cose futili e banali • **to get acquainted** = far la conoscenza • **wiping off** = cancellare • **an ingrained mistrust** = una radicata diffidenza • **alluring** = attraenti • **all the trappings** = tutti i tratti caratteristici, le peculiarità (lett. gualdrappe) • **would not have carried much weight** = non avrebbe avuto molta credibilità (lett.= peso) • **a devout bigot** = un bigotto devoto • **zeal** = zelo ••• **mass Christianization** = cristianizzazione in massa • **that notwithstanding** = nonostante ciò • **Salvation-through-Holy-Baptism** = Salvezza col Santo Battesimo • **Moor** = moro • **whisked off** = mandare via in tutta fretta (lett. spazzolato via) • **assumed name** = nome falso •

The court of Pope Pius the Fourth was not as brilliant or sensational as those of many of his recent predecessors. Times were changing and a less jovial, more demure outlook was starting to creep into Christianity. Yet, Rome was still a glorious city, full of wonderful things and delightful people who sought only to live well and pursue pleasurable activities. Many people of lineage and property came to the Papal court from every Italian principality to display their wit or, if they had none, their money and splendid fashions. The arrival of a young Moorish prince with such a sad story to tell was accepted with casual curiosity and benevolent nonchalance. Everybody was very kind and sociable with Othman, who made the rounds of high society among the who's who of Papal Rome.

The Pope, however, did not have any direct vested interest in a remote and dreary land on the far-away Barbary Coast. Hence, he condescended with fatherly solicitude when by the young Muslim pretender expressed his desire to be baptized. There was a great and rich christening ceremony in the Church of St Peter in Vinculis, with the presence of several cardinals and prelates, many Roman noblemen and their ladies, foreign ambassadors, clergy and

laity. The Pope himself made an appearance later for a quick blessing. Some exquisite mottetos were composed for the special occasion, which were beautifully sung by the children choir of St John in Lateran. The young convert became Christian with the classical name of Metello. Cardinal Pierpompéo Scavolin, the senior cardinal from Venice and one of the most influential members of the papal courts, acted as his godfather. Soon after, the cardinal took Metello into his house and, only a few months later, adopted him officially. The inevitable gossip and innuendoes spread through Rome, suggesting that the adoption was motivated by a unbecoming familiarity of the old prelate with his young pupil. It was, however, absolutely untrue.

• **Pius the Fourth** = Pio IV (papa Medici, milanese, regnò per sei anni dal 1559 al 1565, zio di s. Carlo Borromeo e del cardinal Federigo) • **jovial** = gioviale, allegro • **demure** = austero, contegnoso • **people of lineage and property** = gente nobile e gente ricca • **wit** = spirito, ingegno • **casual curiosity and benevolent nonchalance** = curiosità superficiale e simpatica indifferenza • **made the round** = fece il giro • **the who's who** = la gente che conta (lett.= il "chi è chi") • **vested interest** = interesse specifico • **dreary** = tetro, desolato • **far-away** = lontanissima • **christening** = battesimo • **St Peter in Vinculis** = san Pietro in Vincoli (la chiesa romana dove si trova il Mosé di Michelangelo) • **a quick blessing** = una rapida benedizione • **mottetos** = mottetti, componimenti vocali ••• **St John in Lateran** = la basilica di S. Giovanni in Laterano • **convert** = convertito • **godfather** = padrino • **innuendos** = insinuazioni • **unbecoming** = sconveniente •••

The Cardinal Scavolin was an extremely rich man. He had become very wealthy by the simple expedient of refusing election to the Papacy at the very last moment, in favour of another candidate who then repaid him handsomely with a shower of ecclesiastical benefits, prebends, revenues and other fat compensations. The clever Venetian always took care to choose old, decrepit men with limited surviving power. He was able to apply his strategy at least four times in ten years, helped also by the fact that Pope Marcellus, during the April month of 1555, lasted only 20 days. Having become an extremely rich man, he could freely indulge in his beloved pastime: he was a compulsive collector. He had started by putting together a huge collection of Roman antiquities. Then he took a fancy for jewels and rare gems, which he acquired by the hundreds. Later he moved to the assemblage of a large menagerie of exotic animals, after which he began to acquire old illuminated manuscripts, possibly with some erotic pictures. "*Variety is the spice of life and adds flavour to it*" he used to say. So, he hoarded morocco leather boots and pigskin riding shoes by the hundreds and gilded silver spoons by the thousands. He tried to put together a set of women poets as well, with whom he dreamed of creating a new Female Academy, the Academia Scavoliniana Foeminea. Results were poor, so he became interested in collecting ostrich eggs as well as

holy relics of child saints. Recently, he had thought of starting a collection of exiled foreign princes. Already he had acquired a first cousin of Ivan IV Grand-prince of Muscovy, a scared poor old man who only spoke a unintelligible Russian dialect and ate raw onion, which gave him a tendency to cry often. The young prince of Tlemcen was, therefore, a rare treat for an irrepressible collector like the Cardinal. But the project did not go very far, because no other available princes with suitable pedigrees could be found on the market.

• **handsomely** = riccamente (lett.= bellamente) • **a shower** = una pioggia • **prebends** = prebende • **Pope Marcellus** = papa Marcello II (il papa che regnò per il periodo più breve della storia) • **pastime** = passatempo • **compulsive** = irresistibile • **took a fancy** = si incapricciò • **menagerie** = zoo • **illuminated** = miniati • **hoarded** = fece incetta ••• **morocco leather boots** = stivali di marocchino ••• **pigskin riding shoes** = scarpe da sella in pelle di porco • **Ivan IV** = Ivan il Terribile (zar di Russia dal 1547 al 1584) • **Muscovy** = Moscovia (come allora veniva chiamata la Russia, dalla città di Mosca) • **a rare treat** = un'occasione speciale •

Othman-Metello remained, however, with the Cardinal, who had become rather fond of him in the meantime. Gradually, a thin but persistent bond of mutual liking developed between the old Scavolin and this lean and dark young man, emotional, impulsive and intensely personal in his likes and dislikes, often too lonely in the bright and cheerful city of Rome. *'The man with money has a awful lot of nephews'* says an old latin proverb that Cardinal Scavolin knew too well. Consequently, he could appreciate all the more that young Moroccan prince who never asked him anything. For Metello, the Cardinal, a thick-set man with strong peasant features always kindled by neat peasant shrewdness, represented the nearest thing to a father-figure he ever had. A somewhat inattentive father perhaps, yet sufficiently affectionate and considerate toward him. Moreover, Metello had a wholesome respect for the Cardinal's superior worldly wisdom, so much above his own. All in all, it was an easy and carefree life that opened to Metello in Rome, especially since the Emir of Tlemcen seemed to have lost any direct interest to know if his young half-brother Othman was still alive or not, after the conversion. He was not a threat anymore.

• **bond** = legame • **likes and dislikes** = simpatie e antipatie • **a awful lot** = un'enorme quantità • **thick-set** = robusto • **neat peasant shrewdness** = acuta astuzia contadina • **considerate** = sollecito • **wholesome** = sano • **worldly wisdom** = conoscenza del mondo • **carefree** = spensierata • **threat** = pericolo

The Cardinal was very indulgent with his newly acquired son. He supplied him with money, horses, beautiful apparel, women. Like any other rich young

man of his age, Metello eventually developed a strong appetite for sex and had now the means for satisfying it. He was often uncomfortable in the company of women, especially the smart and scintillating ladies, young, old and middle-aged, who enlived the court of the Pope and the Roman households of most cardinals. Metello tended to feel shy and sullen and clumsy in that environment. Today we would say that he suffered from a typical inferiority complex when dealing with women. However, he liked them. He had a ferocious and savage lust for the female flesh, which pushed him to rape women, to viciously ravish them, with a wantonness and an aggressiveness that were excessive and desperate at the same time. Metello did not have a real love life in Rome, only a contemptuous, bitter, endless bout with sensuality bordering on some kind of vengeful and impotent rage. But he was young, sufficiently attractive and had a very rich protector who could pay. The old Cardinal, however, enjoyed more relaxed and less muddled affairs, when his age and his gout still allowed him. So, the Berber-prince-turned-Christian-nobleman never lacked for women, whenever he felt the craving. Some women, even young fine ladies of the nobility, liked the feeling of being possessed and ravished by a hungry and spiteful man like him.

• **apparel** = abbigliamento, vestiti • **sullen** = cupo, astioso • **clumsy** = goffo, maldestro • **to ... ravish** = violentare • **wantonness** = dissolutezza ••• **bout** = periodo • **vengeful** = vendicativa • **less muddled affairs** = avventure galanti meno complicate • **gout** = gotta ••• **Berber** = berbero • **the craving** = la voglia • **spiteful** = sdegnoso •

If Metello was extravagantly neurotic in bed, he was nevertheless quite normal, even ordinary, in the rest of his daily life. Intellectually, a lack of cohesion often showed itself. He was not, in any case, a non-entity, a pipsqueak. He had a certain assertiveness and applied himself with sufficient involvement in what interested him. This was marred by a general superficiality and thoughtlessness, like the average of men. The Cardinal, practical man that he was (there is, in fact, an enormous difference between earning a lot and being rich: people who really know how to be rich usually tend to be clear-headed and down-to-earth), decided quite early that his adopted son would never make a good diplomat, an acceptable prelate, or even a decent dignitary. Consequently, he decided to push him toward military life, a solution that also suited Metello. The young man did his apprenticeship in the army of the Pope and, being a cardinal's son, received a captain's commission without much difficulty. A few years later, Don Metello - this was his title now, being a person of rank - took part in the famous battle of Lépanto against the Turkish fleet. Unfortunately, the stern old prince Marcantónio Colónna, the commander of the contingent

from the Papal States (the supreme commander of the whole Christian fleet, as we'll see, was the still young Spanish prince Don Juan of Austria), developed a strong personal distaste for Don Metello and took his strong antipathy for him back to Rome. Very soon it became evident that the young Scavolin was not going to have a bright future in the papal army. Hence, the Cardinal sent his adopted son to Venice, where the young captain joined the Venetian army.

- **a non-entity** = un nessuno, una persona di poco conto ••• **a pipsquick** = un tizio qualunque
- **assertiveness** = capacità di farsi valere
- **marred** = guastato (to mar= rovinare, guastare)
- **thoughtlessness** = sventatezza, noncuranza (thought = pensiero)
- **earning a lot** = guadagnare molto
- **clear-headed and down-to-earth** = dalla testa fina e coi piedi per terra
- **sui-ted** = stava bene a ... (to suit somebody = andar bene a qualcuno, fare al caso suo) ••• **a captain's commission** = un posto da capitano
- **a person of rank** = una persona di classe, un nobile
- **Lepanto** = decisiva sconfitta della grande flotta turca lungo le coste greche da parte di una coalizione delle flotte di Venezia, della Spagna, del Papa e del Granduca di Toscana nell'ottobre del 1571
- **stern** = austero, rigido
- **Marcantonio Colonna** = membro della principesca famiglia romana, comandò il contingente papale a Lepanto
- **Don Juan** (Don Giovanni) **d'Austria** = figlio naturale di Carlo V, a soli 26 anni guidò vittoriosamente la flotta cristiana a Lepanto, poi fu un buon governatore spagnolo delle Fiandre, per morirvi però a 33 anni
- **a strong personal distaste** = una forte avversione personale
- **Hence** = Perciò

Life in Venice was as lively and merry as in Rome and Metello, who was living in high style in the old Palazzo Scavolin at the Fondamenta di San Moisè, was easily accepted by most of the Venetian society. He became especially close to the Brabanzi family, near relations to the Cardinal, who lived in a palazzo nearby. The eldest Brabanzi daughter, Desiderata, had been recently widowed after a short marriage and was now living with her family again. Soon she became the lover of the young and well-connected captain. Desiderata, still known as *Dedé* at home, was a tall, forceful woman slightly older than Metello. Not particularly beautiful but with clean and regular features, Dedé had a strong, nearly masculine, bone structure and an even stronger handgrip. She kept her rich blond hair tied up in a golden hair-net and dressed neatly in the Venetian fashion, with wide sleeves, tight bodices and square, low-cut necks that showed a hefty portion of her prosperous white breasts. Desiderata Brabanzi was, moreover, a spirited, self-assured woman with a sharp tongue, a shameless laughter and a taste for dirty words, at least in private. With her strong character she dominated the whole of family life. It came natural for her father, her two brothers, her younger sister (mother had passed away some time before) to come to Dedé for advice, guidance or reassurance. Her ascendancy over them was sure and deep-rooted. Soon, her ascendancy over her new lover was just as far reaching. Metello discovered that Desiderata was the first woman with whom he could really feel comforta-