

present his abject apologies to everybody concerned. All was patched up, and, after an initial sense of embarrassment, gradually life at the castle of Agrocastro went back to normal.

• **in tight corners** = in situazioni difficili (lett. = in angoli stretti) • **wrung their hands** = si torcevano le mani (in disperazione, *to wring* = torcere) • **to soot** = clamare, lenire • **wreck** = rovina, ma più spesso naufragio • **qualified a lot** = puntualizzò molte cose (cioè mise dei termini molto chiari) • **rebuked** = fu rimproverato • **compunctiously** = mostrandosi mortificato (*compunction* = compunzione, rincrescimento) • **contrition** = pentimento, rimorso • **apologies** = scuse • **patched up** = fu appianato (fu messa una pezza, *patch* = toppa, pezza) •

It was, however, a compromise, not a solution; and a compromise, as we all know, while providing a handy umbrella, makes a poor roof. Nothing is more delicate than a delicate balance and it does not take much to tilt the scales. Emilia, for instance, did not react well to the whole affair. She felt uncomfortable even sleeping in the same bed with her handsome husband. She stayed at Dedé's place for the night when Don Metello was away, which now was often. The two women shared the same bed, of course - a quite usual occurrence in old times - and felt much more comfortable in each other's company. For Emilia, her older friend represented a warm, reassuring presence and she huddled against her with the trusty innocence of a kitten, finding it easy to smile and joke together. This captivating playfulness, and the sincere affection she read in the admiring eyes of the girl, induced a tender sense of amiability and love in Dedé. Their caresses become more and more revealing, their small kisses more and more daring. It did not take much time for the two women to get into a passionate entanglement, much more romantic, intense and satisfying than intercourse with their respective husbands. Together, under the same crumpled white sheets of embroidered damask, they spent long warm nights. They slept together during intimate siestas in the oppressively hot afternoons, so stifling in Cyprus even in late September. They leisurely explored each other with desire, with boldness, with sentiment, discovering mutual pleasure and equal stimulation from the secrets of their rose-scented and rich female bodies, so often intertwined in sensuous coils, crawling over each other. During the day, they could now about their usual chores with shining eyes and satisfied smiles. Neither of them neglected her marital duty, which now did not appear so overpowering anymore. Both men were unaware of what was really happening, yet both felt somewhat excluded from their respective wives' new contentment. Iago was not excessively perturbed. He still was getting from his wife what he basically needed. He neither inquired nor made a fuss. But Don Metello did.

• **to tilt the scales** = rompere l'equilibrio (lett. far pendere la bilancia) • **huddled against her** = raggomitolava al suo fianco • **a kitten** = una gattina • **captivating** = piacevole (*to captivate* = attrarre, affascinare) • **entanglement** = groviglio, intrico • **crumpled ... sheets** = lenzuoli tutti spiegazzati • **siestas** = riposi pomeridiani, la *siesta* • **stifling** = soffocanti • **rose-scented** = dal profumo di rosa • **interweaved in sensuous coils** = intrecciati in viluppi sensuali • **usual chores** = le loro faccende quotidiane • **marital duty** = doveri coniugali •

Metello could not resign himself to accept a compelling but mortifying truth. A truth that not only blackened his honour and self-esteem but was also hurting his male vanity. Like many people who find themselves patently in the wrong but are essentially not open to self-criticism, this gentleman increasingly convinced himself that he was only a victim of an unfair injustice. What had he done wrong? Nothing, really. The blame surely was to go to somebody else. It does not take much to a self-suggestible mind to find suitable culprits and, without the shadow of doubt, cleanse itself by incriminating others. The subconscious mind of Othman-Metello must have been working in unfathomable ways, because the man became more and more convinced that somebody had been able to worm his way into the privacy of his marriage, spoiling the beautiful relationship that previously existed between himself and Dedé. He was right, in a way, although he never had an inkling of doubt about the increasingly close friendship between his wife and young Emilia. Again, his male vanity blinded him completely. No one would have thought possible that a man could be cuckolded by a woman. It was unfeasible. It was illogical. It was unthinkable. So, no one ever spared a thought about it, Don Metello among them. It had to be another man. But who? who? Metello did not even consider the garrison soldiers. A real Venetian lady of good breeding like Desiderata Brabanzi, a wife, in addition, to a princely pretender and goddaughter-in-law to a cardinal of the Holy Roman Church, never - he thought - would mix with low class soldiery, half of them not even Christians and the rest as coarse and flea-ridden as sewer rats.

• **compelling** = inevitabile (*to compel* = costringere) • **patently** = apertamente (*patent* = ovvio, evidente) • **a self-suggestible mind** = una mente autosuggestionabile • **suitable culprits** = colpevoli adatti • **cleanse itself** = assolvere se stesso • **unfathomable** = insondabile (*athom* = misura di profondità di 6 piedi) • **to worm his way into** = insinuarsi in (*to worm* = scavare come un verme) • **be cuckolded by ...** = esser fatto becco da ... (*cuckold* = cornuto, forse da *cuckoo* = cuculo) • **unfeasible** = impossibile (lett. impraticabile) • **lady of good breeding** = una signora della buona società (lett. di buona educazione) • **god-daughter-in-law** = composto da *god-daughter* (figlioccia, figlia adottiva) e *daughter-in-law* (nuora), cioè 'moglie del figlio adottivo' • **coarse** = rozzi • **flea-ridden** = pieni di (lett. infestati da) pulci • **sewer rats** = topacci da fogna •

Besides the still-young ensign Iago, there was no other decent man at Agrocastro. Metello knew quite well that Dedé had Iago in very low esteem, nevertheless for a while he kept his eyes open and made secret inquiries. No, it was not Iago. He became certain, eventually, that his second-in-command had not attempted, in deeds as well as thoughts, at Donna Desiderata's virtue. To tell the truth, Don Metello had been convinced all along of the faithfulness of his Iago. He knew the man was bound to him by real devotion. But then, who else?

One hot afternoon he found Father Alvisé coming out of his wife's room putting on his jacket and fastening the lace collarette, and then innocently scratching his crotch, as men of all conditions do when they are not in public. Grinding his teeth and frothing with rage, Metello caught the little priest in an iron grip and was going to kill the poor man, who was squeaking in white terror. With his short legs flailing in the air, he was like a fat rabbit about to be slaughtered. It turned out that Father Alvisé had gone to Dedé for her usual monthly confession. Because the day was a rather hot, he had made himself a little more comfortable, having previously asked permission from the lady. Nothing indecent, however, as the small plump priest was a chaste and saintly man in those matters. Metello was obliged to apologize once more. A small satisfaction was that during all that rough shaking a carved tortoise-shell comb belonging to Donna Desiderata had fallen out to the ground. Obviously, Dedé's routine search of the poor Father's pockets had been not thorough enough. She was rather annoyed by Metello's stupid fuss, although she was glad to recover the comb. On his part, Father Alvisé was so kind to forget the whole incident.

Nevertheless, Metello did not abandon his suspicions and watched the few guests, merchants, ship captains and officers who arrived in those months to Agrocastro. But to no avail, because nobody ever made a pass at the lady of the castle. Donna Desiderata on the meantime was the usual proficient and even-tempered wife. Sometimes, at mid-morning, or after hot afternoons, she wore a sort of dreamy smile, so unusual on her, looking out into nothingness with half-closed eyes, as shortsighted persons do. Under his taut fawny skin Metello frowned, for he knew that he was excluded by Dedé's new dreams, whatever they were. Such a thought gave him pain and inner discomfort. Few sights are more embarrassing and distressing than that of an embittered man nursing a personal grievance which overpowers his judgments. Yet, nothing happened.

- **the lace collarette** = il collarino di pizzo • **scratching his crotch** = grattandosi le parti basse
- **grinding** = digrignando • **frothing** = schiumando • **an iron grip** = una presa di ferro • **squeaking** = sguittendo • **flailing** = sgambettando • to **apologize** = scusarsi • **chaste** = casto •

carved tortoise-shell comb = un pettine di tartaruga lavorato • **routine search** = l'abituale perquisizione • **stupid fuss** = pandemonio stupido • **to no avail** = invano (lett. senza profitto) • **even-tempered** = di carattere equilibrato • **a sort of a dreamy smile** = con un sorriso sognante stampato sul viso • **shortsighted persons** = chi è miope • **taut fawny skin** = tirata pelle bruna • **frowned** = si corrucciava (lett. aggrottava le ciglia) • **embittered** = indispettito • **a personal grievance** = un personale risentimento •

With the end of summer, visitors became less and less frequent. By November all heavy sailing virtually ceased. For the next four months or so, only fishing boats would go out to sea, braving strong winds and bad weather. In the third week of November, however, a small Christian flotilla suddenly appeared before Agrocastro and asked permission to moor in its tiny harbour. There was some kind of emergency, they said. There were three small galleys plus one galeote, a sort of brig, of the Knights of Saint Stephen, a lay order recently founded by the Granduke of Tuscany with aims not different from those of the Knights of Malta: to fight the Infidels for the triumph of the Faith, to free Christian slaves out of humanitarian reasons, to scout the sea for privateers and pirates, who swarmed like sharks, and to do some occasional freebooting themselves, for personal gain and to help fill the Granduke's coffers. The four Tuscan ships had just had a bad clash with a larger Turkish force escorting a rich convoy of pilgrims sailing from Constantinople and the Black Sea principalities to Egypt, on their way to Mecca. The attackers had been outgunned by the Turks and had to run for their lives. In that skirmish several men and one of the captains had been left so severely wounded that they would surely not survive on board. The Knights, in fact, were sailing straight back to the Tuscan port of Leghorn and the passage was going to be rough, given the late season. Could the Venetian garrison take care of the wounded, until next spring? The Order of Saint Stephen would handsomely reward the garrison commander and, as first payment, a generous sum would be left with the wounded men.

• **heavy sailing** = la navigazione maggiore (che non fosse quella di piccolo cabotaggio) • **braving** = sfidando (*to brave*= affrontare) • **flotilla** = flottiglia, piccola squadra navale • **to moor** = ormeggiare • **galeote** = galeotta (nave militare sottile e veloce, a remi e con un'unica vela) • **brig** = brigantino (piccolo bastimento a vela) • **Knights of Saint Stephen**= Cavalieri di Santo Stefano (ordine militare istituito nel 1561, a imitazione dei Cavalieri di Malta, per difendere le coste toscane e il nuovo porto franco di Livorno ma anche per per contrastare l'espansionismo turco nel Mediterraneo) • **Granduke of Tuscany** = il Granduca di Toscana (Cosimo 1° de Medici, figlio di Giovanni dalle Bande Nere, fondatore della dinastia) • **to scout** = andare in ricognizione • **privateers** = corsari (armatori privati autorizzati alla guerra *'di corsa'* attaccando navi nemiche, ma anche neutrali) • **swarmed like sharks** = pululavano come squali (*swarm* = sciame d'api) • **freebooting** = predare, fare un po' di filibusta • **coffers** = forzieri • **clash** = scontro • **pilgrims** = pellegrini (mussulmani alla Mecca) • **Black Sea principalities** = principati del Mar Nero (stati vassalli ottomani, sia in Crimea che sulle coste georgiane)

ne, allora sotto l'autorità del Sultano) • **outgunned** = pesantemente cannoneggiato (*to outgun* = avere una netta superiorità di fuoco d'artiglieria) • **to run for their lives** = scappare per salvare la pelle • **skirmish** = scaramuccia • **Leghorn** = Livorno (in inglese si pronuncia *Li-horn*) • **the passage** = la traversata • **take care** = curare •

Don Metello accepted and an agreement was signed by both parties, after which two large purses of gold ducats changed hands. The casualties of the attack were then disembarked and, immediately after, the Granduke's galleys sailed away, in a great hurry to arrive in safe waters before the first winter gales. The worst case among the wounded men was the captain of one of the galleys, whom an accurate Turkish grapeshot had practically scalped, eating away half of his face. The poor fellow, a burly man in his sixties, with thick gray mustaches and a wild gray goatee, rejoicing in the name of Don Evangelista Del Cassio, was already delirious and beyond any human help. A nephew of his stayed behind at Agrocastro to assist the doomed man, as well as to keep an eye on the other wounded sailors. He was a young officer, not yet 23 years of age, Michele by name, also a knight of Saint Stephen. Like his uncle, he came from one of the most influential families of Pisa. His grandfather, however, had been a village butcher, known all over the place as Masone del Cazzo - roughly, Big Tom the Prick. Grandfather had begun his fortune by selling rotten beef and other provisions to the imperial troops during their invasion of Italy in 1525-30 and then, after moving to Pisa and buying a big house, went on for many years in shady deals and fraudulent contracts with the Granduke's administration. Later, after his death, his *nouveau-riche* children were able to buy a knighthood and tried to polish up that embarrassing family name a little. Within two generations, they had become men of lineage and property. Their patent of nobility still reeked of rancid meat, but nobody cared, Don Michele least of all. Only, he had himself called Don Michele Cassio, dropping that too revealing "Del" from his family name.

• **purses of gold ducats** = borse di ducati d'oro • **casualties** = feriti (lett. vittime) • **disembarked** = sbarcati • **winter gales** = tempeste invernali • **grapeshot** = scarica a mitraglia (lett. colpo a grappolo) • **scalped** = gli aveva tolto lo scalpo (cioè il cuoio capelluto) • **a burly man** = un uomo corpulento • **goatee** = pizzetto • **rejoicing in the name** = che si compiaceva nel nome • **stayed behind** = rimase • **doomed** = condannato (*doom* = destino nefasto) • **butcher** = macellaio • **the Prick** = espressione popolare per *Cazzo* (lett. punteruolo, pungolo) • **provisions** = rifornimenti • **invasion of Italy in 1525-30** = si riferisce alla calata di truppe imperiale tedesche, i *lanzichenecchi*, che misero poi al sacco Roma • **shady deals** = affari poco chiari (*shade* = ombra) • **nouveau riche** = espressione francese per 'nuovo ricco', arricchiti • **knighthood** = cavalierato • **to polish up** = ripulire (lett. tirare a lucido) • **men of lineage and property** = uomini di lignaggio e facoltosi • **patent of nobility** = brevetto di nobiltà • **reeked** = puzzava • **dropping** = lasciando cadere •

In spite of his nephew's assistance and the help of the garrison personnel, Don Evangelista died two days later in great pain and was buried near the castle's chapel under a carved cross of local white stone. Of the wounded men two died, the others slowly recovered. The young Cassio was left marooned, so to speak, at Agrocastro for the rest of the winter months, as no other ship was sailing back to Europe during that period. There was now another gentleman residing at the castle. Don Michele Cassio was a lean and wiry young man, with sharp but not beautiful features and an even sharper mind. His company was always very pleasant, because he had a witty and snappy tongue. Not only he had some sugared speech in store and a disposition for speaking, but tended to be bold, pleasant and very forthright. The women started to like him very much, because he made them laugh, played party games, sang limericks and funny songs. His presence now animated the dinner table, dispelling much of the winter boredom of always having to see the same faces. Even Don Metello Scavolin, strangely enough, liked him. The young guest never embarrassed the Commandant by aiming his witticisms at him, but actually treated Don Metello with deference and friendly respect. His pleasantries with the ladies were so innocent and tasteful that every suspicion still quivering in Metello's mind was soon quelled. Moreover, it was so nice to have somebody truly amusing that could make dinners run so successfully and winter evenings pass so pleasantly. Garrison life can be so dull and stale than even the pangs of jealousy would not stand in the way of having some decent fun.

• **a carved cross** = una croce scolpita • **marooned** = abbandonato (*to maroon* = abbandonare qualcuno su di un'isola deserta) • **so to speak** = tanto per capirci (lett. per parlare così) • **lean and wiry** = magro e asciutto (*wire* = filo di ferro) • **snappy** = mordente (*snap* = morso) • **had ... sugared speech in store** = aveva una riserva di battute piacevoli (lett. zuccherate) • **forthright** = schietto (lett. esplicito) • **sang limericks** = cantava ritornelli (In Inghilterra L. sono poesie satiriche tradizionalmente in cinque versi, forse dall'omonima città irlandese) • **dispelling** = scacciando • **witticisms** = spiritosaggini (*wit* = arguzia, prontezza) • **pleasantries** = facezie, battute di spirito • **quivering** = fremente (*to quiver* = tremolare, rabbrivire) • **quelled** = cancellata (*to quell* = reprimere, p.es. una rivolta) • **dull and stale** = noiosa e stantia (*dull* = orina di cavallo) •

Even Metello liked a good laugh during dinner, especially if somebody else was to be made monkey of. And, during those long winter months, Michele started by poking fun at everybody at Agrocastro, sometimes wickedly, sometimes lewdly, sometimes cruelly, wisely sparing only the lord of the castle. One Sunday, for instance, as a friendly joke he had black pepper put in the holy wine that Father Alvisè was using for Mass, making the doughy little man blush violently and fluster helplessly during the rest of the service. Everybody knew that pepper was a strong aphrodisiac and the poor priest was cruelly

mocked for days. Then, Don Michele made the indio, the cook Pelagonio, believe that he could become a white man, should he take a bath every night for a full month in the urine of a white dog. There was only one dog with a white coat at the castle and for days the cook was seen going around with a flask waiting for that particular dog to raise his leg. It took some time to fill a small barrel, as the dog was not very cooperative. When no results were forthcoming, Don Michele pointed out to Pelagonio some small brown spots on the dog's coat. The poor Indio almost cried in despair, but the whole garrison laughed for days. Still later, as penance in an innocent society game played after dinner, Michele had Iago sent to the beach wearing only his wife's petticoat and a scarf on the head, with a small candle in his hand. While Iago graciously complied, Don Michele ran to the barracks to tell the garrison men that a strange veiled woman had been seen, that very night, selling her favours quite cheaply on the beach front. At once, a few sex-starved Uskocks ran out to take advantage of this unexpected bounty and in the dark Iago had to defend his honour bodily. He did not fare well, as the Uskocks went wild with disappointment and frustration.

• **a good laugh** = una buona risata • **to be made monkey of** = veniva fatto segno agli scherzi (*to monkey about* = fare brutti scherzi - lett. far scimmia di qlcn) • **poking fun** = prendere in giro (lett. spingere uno scherzo) • **wickedly** = maliziosamente • **lewdly** = in modo pesante (*lewd* = indecente) • **the doughy little man** = quell'ometto grassottello (*doughy* = pastoso) • **fluster** = confondersi, agitarsi • **mocked** = schernito • **a flask** = una fiasca, borraccia • **barrel** = barilotto • **petticoat** = sottoveste • **barracks** = caserme, baracche • **sex-starved Uskocks** = mercenari Uskocchi affamati di sesso • **bounty** = dono del cielo (lett. premio) •

Iago was an ideal target for Don Michele's pranks. A would-be social climber with little education and not always bright, he tended to be pompous, over-eager, and lacked finesse. The foxy Tuscan did not have any difficulty to make him talk at length about his not-so-latent ambitions. Then, one morning, as an afterthought, he told Iago that his family name, Bigatto, ringed a bell, but he could not tell why. Next day, the ensign was told with a straight face that, after consulting old books during the whole night, Don Michele had found out that Bigattus Rex had been a famous ancient king of the Lombard nation and that his descendants had settled in the town of Bergamo. Hence, quite surely Iago was of royal ancestry and could rightly claim to be of noble blood. He only had to write to the Senate, in Venice, giving proof of his origin. Most probably, he could be entitled to a licence of nobility, legally adding "Don" to his first name. Blinded by vanity, Iago sucked up every word and with a warm, spreading sense of joy went to prepare his letter. That same evening, at dinner with the Scavolin, he repeated with pride the whole story - only to be floo-

ded with laughter and sneers by everybody. When he became angry and tried to object, he was coldly told by Dedé that no man is so empty as the man who is full of himself; he should learn that a man's family tree was not as important as his backbone. Iago smarted for days and could not forget, nor forgive, these humiliating words of Lady Scavolin.

• **pranks** = scherzi • **a would-be social climber** = uno che che ci teneva a sentirsi importante (lett. un aspirante arrampicatore sociale) • **over-eager** = più che zelante • **the foxy Tuscan** = quel volpone di Toscano • **afterthought** = riflessione, ripensamento • **the Lombard nation** = in questo contesto il popolo dei Longobardi • **royal ancestry** = stirpe reale • **licence of nobility** = brevetto di nobiltà • **sucked up** = credette (lett. si succhiò) • **sneers** = beffe • **backbone** = spina dorsale • **smarted** = ne soffrì •

Actually, the Don Michele Cassio was not a witty man: he was a wicked, malicious young man. But wickedness is often mistaken for wit by the general public - unless we should truly believe that old Greek philosopher, who said that some people's faults are more attractive than their virtues. Michele did not like people. He could hate them quite easily. He could mock and despise Iago, but envied his exceptional good looks (he himself was not a good-looking man). It did not take much for him to figure out the strong, intimate bond between the two women, and he resented their private happiness (he was also not a happy man). He humoured Don Metello Scavolin, but bore him malice for his true aristocratic connections, so much above his own. He could be amusingly ironic and sarcastic, but one of the surest expressions of pain is sarcasm. A dark pain was probably grinding his soul, but we do not know what it was. Michele never spoke about it to anyone, perhaps not even to himself. Possibly, he was not even a bad fellow, just a bitterly unhappy one. Burned by his unknown inner despair, he could not stand other people's lives, happy or otherwise. Some men are this way, and some women too, now as in the past, and they do much hidden damage to people around them. So, during his forced winter stay at Agrocastro after the death of his uncle, Don Michele used his funny pranks and caustic wit as cover for gradually and imperceptibly disrupting other people's lives, while making them laugh.

• **a witty man** = un uomo allegro • **wit** = arguzia, allegria • **mock** = canzonare, farsi beffe • **humoured** = divertiva • **malice** = , risentimento (lett. cattiveria) • **grinding** = tormentando (lett. macinando) • **caustic wit** = umorismo tagliente •

He began with Dedé because, through her, both Emilia and Don Metello could also be hurt. He started by openly flirting with her, in an amusing and melodramatic way. It was a caricature of a courtship and, at dinner, people laughed and teased them about it. Don Michele laughed too, but kept going,

overloading his tone with a rather heavy hand. Gradually, his flirting became more equivocal and he was openly flaunting prurient advances - as a joke, of course. Dedé was growing slightly uneasy. She did not want to be discourteous to her guest and tried to dismiss the whole story in the same jocular tones. But to no avail. The young knight of Saint Stephen was clever and could make her play as he wanted, like a gloating cat playing for a while with a small mouse in its paws. He gave his ambiguous game a rest, but still let occasional innuendoes drop, always in the presence of her husband or her friend. He was never explicit, however, and always kept a smiling, nonchalant attitude about it, tactfully.

• **teased** = si burlavano • **overloading his tone** = giocando pesante (lett. caricando il tono) • **flaunting** = ostentando • **prurient advances** = approcci lascivi • **in the same jocular tones** = con lo stesso tono scherzoso • **a gloating cat** = un avido gatto gongolante • **paws** = zampe • **occasional innuendoes** = allusioni saltuarie • **nonchalant** = disinvolta, spregiudicata • **tactfully** = con discrezione •

Already insecure, Emilia could not avoid feeling hurt by all these disturbing attentions to her very special, older friend. In spite of all Dedé's protestations, a trickle of doubt started to poison the previous special happiness of the poor girl. She knew too well she was in a delicate position. Also, she felt that, with her humble origin and limited personality, she could never compete with a brilliant, much more refined person, a nobleman and, above all, a male. She could only offer her youth and her enthusiastic dedication, but probably these gifts were not enough for a woman as sophisticated and experienced as Dedé, she thought to herself with a sense of loss. The poor Emilia pined and cowered in her heart, too afraid to speak to anyone about this growing sense of hopelessness. Equally uneasy and disturbed was Metello. He was somewhat disorientated by the strange behaviour of his guest. From the beginning, he had genuinely liked the young Michele Cassio. By nature, Don Metello was not a stupid person and could certainly enjoy the company of an intelligent man. Don Michele had come as a breath of fresh air in the daily sluggishness of garrison life and, like everybody, Don Metello thought very highly of him. But now things seemed to go a little out of hand. If it was all a game, he was afraid of overreacting and exposing himself to ridicule by asking the young man to put a stop to that mocked romance with his wife. He could not even imagine making a fool of himself with such a request. He felt very touchy and uneasy about it and did not know how to cope with this distressing thought. After the still recent mishap, he could not really confide in Dedé with the same confidence as before. He was now afraid that his wife would only laugh at his anxieties and he could not stand the thought of that either.

But then - was he asking in his mind - why did not Dedé herself put a stop to this irritating situation? Perhaps she was not even irritated by it... Othman-Metello tried very hard not to harbour such far-fetched misgivings. But each of Michele's accidental remarks fell like acid drops on the already raw skin of Don Metello's soul. And yet, he did not react. Neither did the others. At least on the surface, life at the small castle went on, as leisurely and outwardly pleasant as before.

• **a trickle of doubt** = un'ombra di dubbio (lett. un gocciolio) • **pined and cowered** = si struggeva e si faceva piccina (*to cower*= accucciarsi) • **sluggishness** = noia (lett. inerzia) • **thought very highly of him** = lo teneva in palmo di mano (lett. pensava molto bene di lui) • **a little out of hand** = un po' troppo fuori controllo • **overreacting** = reagire eccessivamente • **mocked romance** = finto amoretto • **touchy** = ipersensibile • **to cope** = affrontare • **mishap** = incidente • **to harbour** = nutrire, covare • **far-fetched** = eccessivo • **outwardly** = esternamente •

In the depths of such murky waters the young Cassio moved like a fish. He had to admit to himself that he was taking a subtle pleasure in sensing all these uneasy feelings spreading among his hosts. He felt like the master of a puppet show pulling all the strings, while in reality he was only pandering to his impulsive vindictiveness under the constant veneer of courtesy and amiability. He felt crafty. He felt superior, quite a cut above those poor underdogs. And for reasons well beyond -and well below- reason, he even felt vindicated of his lurking inner despair. But, as usual, the man who is too sharp is the first to cut his finger. Michele wanted to push ahead with his game and thought the time had come to bodily involve Donna Desiderata herself. Not that he wanted her. He did not even like women's flesh. But Dedé had proved to be a sufficiently strong and independent person, who could freely laugh at his games without falling under his spell. Don Michele wanted to subdue her, bodily, in a humiliating manner if possible, in order to shatter that proud woman. So, he went to her rooms when he knew she was by herself, alone, and quite openly said that she should make love to him, there and then. Dedé took it as a prank at the beginning and slightly annoyed bid him to stop that game.

• **murky waters** = brutte acque, acque fangose (*murk* = oscurità, buio) • **a subtle pleasure** = un piacere indefinibile • **puppet show** = gioco di marionette • **pandering to** = compiacendo, incoraggiando • **under the ...veneer** = sotto la vernice, l'apparenza (lett. l'impiallacciatura di una superficie di legno) • **crafty** = astuto, scaltro • **a cut above** = un buon palmo sopra (lett. un taglio sopra) • **underdogs** = poveracci (lett. sotto-cani) • **vindicated** = giustificato • **lurking** = nascosta (*to lurk* = celare) • **to subdue** = sottomettere • **to shatter** = rompere, mandare in pezzi • **bid him** = gli ingiunse •

He insisted, cocksure, and she became irritated, asking him in very sharp tones to leave the room. The young man was not a subject to be curbed with words and answered with even more cutting irony. Then, with a cruel smile, he let out that he was not unaware of her forbidden little plays with her female sidekick : she had better to play his game than to have to explain the affair to her husband. Dedé's neck reddened dangerously but she was still able to keep her anger under sufficient control and to answer that she did not know what he was speaking about, and did not even want to know. But she did not like insolent, arrogant puppies who use their tongues to slander honest people when they should be licking other people's arses. If he did not immediately go, she herself would call Don Metello. With a mocking face, the young man laughed and took her by the waist, trying to kiss her with his open mouth. But Dedé was a very strong woman. Two sudden heavy-handed slaps made don Michele's head turn both ways and a violent knee-blow hit his crotch, in quick succession. The man bent painfully with a long low groan and a final powerful kick made him tumble to the floor, hitting a sideboard full of pewters, jars and bottles. There was a violent crash and the young knight of Saint Stephen was hit by a shower of broken pottery and glass. A falling heavy decanter made a deep cut with a sudden bloody gush on his scalp. Blood did not stop a Donna Desiderata livid with rage and by now swearing like a rabid cow. The woman kept kicking the fallen man with unbridled fury, letting out pent up frustrations and feminine exasperations. The awful noise of the crash had servants and maids come running to the room. Shouting and crying, a group of them bodily restrained their infuriated mistress, while Don Michele, covered in blood, was taken away by others.

• **cocksure** = sicuro e arrogante (come un galletto) • **to be curbed** = d'esser tenuto a freno • **cutting irony** = ironia tagliente • **her female sidekick** = la sua amichetta (*sidekick* = amico per la pelle, ma anche, in senso spregiativo, tirapiedi - lett. calcio laterale) • **reddened** = arrossì • **puppies** = cuccioli • **to slander** = per diffamare, calunniare • **licking other people's arses** = leccare il culo alla gente • **mocking face** = grinta beffarda • **by the waist** = intorno alla vita • **heavy-handed slaps** = schiaffoni a mano aperta (lett. pesante) • **knee-blow** = ginocchiata • **crotch** = inguine • **a long, low groan** = un lungo e sordo gemito • **to tumble** = ruzzolare • **a sideboard full of pewters** = una credenza piena di peltri • **decanter** = caraffa • **a sudden bloody gush** = un improvviso gran fiotto di sangue • **scalp** = cuoio cappelluto • **a rabid cow** = una furia (lett. una vacca rabbiosa) • **unbridled** = scatenata (*bridle* = briglia) • **pent up frustrations** = frustrazioni nascoste (lett. trattenute) •

An alarmed Don Metello arrived in the middle of all this bloody and noisy confusion and immediately asked his wife what had happened. But Dedé, still panting with fury, refused to answer. Quite sharply, she told him that it was nothing he should worry about and that everything was under control, at least

for the moment. She just wanted to be left alone for a while and, in so saying, went to the bedroom closing the door behind her. Obviously, all Dedé needed was to calm down a little, after her violent outburst. Moreover, she knew that she must keep Emilia out of the whole unpleasant business, if possible, and needed some time to quietly think up a suitable and discreet way to seal young Cassio's mouth. Undiplomatically, Metello started to bang on the door, demanding Dedé open it, his rage mounting. But he could not get at his wife. Her husband's stupid insistence exasperated the already taut nerves of the woman and a wild quarrel ensued. So, no explanation was possible. The whole of Agrocastro was now in turmoil, as the quarrel increasingly involved all the castle personnel, even the soldiers, with everybody yelling and shouting, taking sides with the Master or with the Lady, not knowing what exactly had happened

• **panting** = ansimando • **outburst** = scoppio (di rabbia) • **to seal young Cassio's mouth** = chiudere (lett. sigillare) la bocca del giovane Cassio • **taut** = tesi • **ensued** = ne derivò • **in turmoil** = in agitazione, tumulto • **yelling** = urlando •

Wisely, Don Michele Cassio uttered not a word while somebody found the time, among the general screaming and yelling, to quickly clean and bandage his wound. Michele knew he had overstepped his luck and that his stay at the castle would now become precarious. He had not yet been confronted by an angry Don Metello, still in the midst of his wild domestic quarrel. Surely, he did not cherish the idea of the inevitable show-down with a man much bigger and more powerful than he was. It would be safer to disappear for a spell and fast, even if his badly bandaged head hurting a great deal and he was still aching because of Dedé's powerful kicks. Tasting of blood in his mouth, Michele checked with his tongue, only to find that he had also lost a front tooth. With a sense of dejection, he knew that his famous sarcastic smile had been disfigured for ever. By now, the young man felt increasingly sick. His heart was smarting because he, a brilliant young knight of Saint Stephen, a man of sharp wits and quite superior brains, had been not merely beaten up, but downright shamed, rejected, defeated, by a woman. Never before he had been put down and outwitted in such a demeaning way. Thus, before disappearing, he needed to find some sort of sweet revenge, to sooth his singed pride, his swollen limbs and his, by now, crooked smile.

Don Michele stayed out of everybody's way for the whole evening, while slowly the hubbub at the castle died out. That very night, however, he went furtively to Father Alvisè's little house. By pure chance, the month before he had found out the unbelievable dark secret of the poor priest's life. It would not be very difficult for a glib young man like Michele Cassio to blackmail him.

In a very short time, a certain sum of money was thus extorted, sufficient for a safe journey. But Don Michele wanted something more. He threaten and cajoled the frightened small man, asking for something very personal belonging to Donna Desiderata. Quite rightly he expected that, among the many objects the priest routinely pilfered from the commandant's house, some must have escaped detection one time or another.

It did not take much bullying before one of the famous sets of handkerchiefs was timidly produced. Don Michele took it and went away, without even closing the door behind him. It was late, by now, but the limping and bandaged young man went straight to Iago's lodgings. He rattled quietly on the door, trying not to be overheard, until the ensign himself came out, followed by his young wife, both in their nightgowns.

• **wisely** = saggiamente • **uttered not a word** = non pronunciò parola (*to utter* = emettere) • **overstepped** = ecceduto (lett. oltrepassato) • **in the midst of** = antiquato per: nel mezzo di • **did not cherish the idea** = non se la senti (lett. non accarezzò l'idea) • **for a spell** = per un po' (*spell* = momento) • **he was still aching** = era ancora tutto indolenzito (*ache* [pronuncia: *éik*] = dolore) • **a front tooth** = un dente davanti, un incisivo • **dejection** = abbattimento • **was smarting** = gli bruciava (*smart* = dolore interno, sia fisico che morale) • **sharp wits** = la sua arguzia pungente • **downright** = completamente, del tutto • **outwitted** = messo nel sacco (lett. battuto in astuzia) • **such a demeaning way** = in modo così avvilito • **to sooth** = lenire, placare • **his singed pride** = il suo orgoglio ferito (lett. bruciacchiato) • **swollen** = gonfi, pesti • **crooked smile** = sorriso ormai rovinato (lett. storto – *to crook* = piegare – ma anche *crook* = truffaldino) • **the hubbub** = baccano • **a glib young man** = un giovanotto in gamba (lett. dalla lingua sciolta) • **blackmail** = ricattare • **was thus extorted** = fu così estorte • **cajoled** = raggirò, circui • **routinely** = di norma, abitualmente • **pilfered** = rubacchiava • **bullying** = maltrattamenti (*to bully* = malmenare, abusare, agire da bullo) • **produced** = venne fuori (*to produce* = presentare, mostrare) • **limping** = claudicante (*to limp* = zoppicare) • **lodgings** = abitazione • **rattled** = battè (*to rattle* = sbattere) • **nightgowns** = camicie da notte •

Don Michele put a finger on his lips and with a heart-renting sigh whispered to a very astonished Iago: ***“I do not know how to apologize for this unforgivable intrusion so late into the night, Don Iago, but I must speak to you, dear friend, on a matter of the utmost importance and urgency. Please, bring me where we will not be heard or seen by any indiscreet person ”***

Disconcerted by the surprise, Iago opened the door for him to come in, but Michele refused to enter: ***“No one, not even your dear wife, must know that I have spoken to you tonight. I cannot be in your house and perhaps put you in jeopardy by accepting your courteous bidding. It is a matter of life or death, you see. I am in a bleak predicament and I look upon you now as my only possible ally. I should ask on your honour that you will not to betray me, don Iago. Give me your word, as the fair***

gentleman you are. You could snatch me from the jaws of death, should you desire to help me. I do hope you will throw me a life line, Don Iago. I know you are a truly kind and good person, a noble soul. Please, tell your fair wife to leave us alone for a little time”

Although greatly puzzled by this strange and unusual request, Iago reacted just as could be expected to the sense of urgency and to the mellow undercurrent of adulation pouring out of Don Michele’s amazing talk. Immediately, he ordered a very reluctant Emilia to go back to bed and to close the door behind her. Then, still in his nightgown on his doorstep, he hastened to reassure the distressed young knight that he could count on him for whatever assistance he could provide. He gave his word as a soldier and a gentleman that he would be very discreet, silent as a monk in the grave. While Iago was uttering such pledges in a low voice, it was also very clear that he could not restrain his bursting curiosity to find out what the devil had happened that afternoon.

• **a heart-renting sight** = un sospiro straziante (lett. da strappare il cuore - *to rent* = lacerare) • **wispersed** = sussurrò • **disconcerted** = sconcertato • **in jeopardy** = a rischio • **bidding** = offerta (*to bid* = offrire) • **a bleak predicament** = una situazione difficile ((bleak = desolato) • **snatch ... from** = strappare da • **jaws** = fauci (lett. mascelle) • **a life line** = fune di salvataggio • **fair wife** = buona moglie (*fair* = giusto, buono, chiaro) • **puzzled** = sconcertato • **the mellow undercurrent** = il morbido flusso sotterraneo • **amazing talk** = parlata sorprendente, affascinante • **hastened** = s’affrettò • **distressed** = turbato, afflitto • **discreet** = discreto • **pledges** = impegni • **bursting curiosity** = curiosità sfrenata (*to burst* = esplodere) • **what the devil had happened** = cosa mai era successo (lett. cosa diavolo era successo) •

Only after being so reassured, Don Michele accepted to enter Iago’s house. In the very dark main room, they sat together at the only table, modestly lit by just one diminutive oil lamp. For a short while they looked at each other, Iago still undressed and barefooted, Michele with his bandaged head. The flickering small light was casting distorted shadows on their faces. Then, the young knight began in a very conspiratorial way: ***“Jealousy, dear sir, is like the breath of a fiery dragon. It burns whatever it touches with its long, horrible flames. It burns high and strong, consuming both the marrow with the bones. Ah, my friend, how scorching is that fire, leaving only smoke, ashes and soot where happiness and joy reigned before.”***

Here he sighed piteously, while a silent Iago, wearing a counterfeit version of a sympathetic look, was waiting with morbid curiosity for the real story to begin: ***“Alas, envy and jealousy brought me and my soul to perdition. Bear with me a little, Don Iago, and I shall tell you my miserable story. Then, you will pity me, I hope. But let me start from the beginning. You remember that I arrived at this castle to assist my poor wretched uncle.***

Soon after his lamentable death, I found myself enmeshed in a knotted intrigue. Surely you are too smart, sir, not to have noticed, during the last few months, that Donna Desiderata, Dedé I mean, and myself had developed a love affair of some sort....”

Iago politely coughed only a little, making show of some slight embarrassment. He was following very intently the young man’s confession, trying to avoid staring too much at the dark gap in Don Michele’s front teeth.

“Yes, my friend; it started as flirtation, then became an entanglement, and ended in passion. Soon we ended in her bed, of course, lustfully, committing adultery... but I should not bother you with all the prurient and lewd details of such an illicit love...”

Iago coughed again a little, mainly to signify his slight disappointment for not daring to ask for those prurient details on the illicit love.

• **diminutive** = minuscola • **barefooted** = a piedi nudi • **bandaged head** = testa fasciata • **flickering** = tremolante (*flicker* = guizzo) • **was casting** = proiettava (*to cast* = gettare) • **marrow** = midollo • **scorching** = rovente (*to scorch* = bruciare) • **soot** = fuliggine • **piteously** = in modo miserando • **a counterfeit version** = una falsa versione (*counterfeit* = contraffatta) • **a sympathetic look** = un atteggiamento amichevole • **morbid curiosity** = curiosità morbosa • **bear with me** = abbiate un po’ di pazienza con me • **enmeshed** = irretito (*mesh* = maglia, rete) • **a knotted intrigue** = un tortuoso complotto (*knot* = nodo) • **too smart** = troppo intelligente • **a love affair of some sort** = un amorazzo di poco conto (lett. un certo tipo di relazione amorosa) • **some slight embarassement** = un certo leggero imbarazzo • **staring ...at** = fissando • **the dark gap** = lo spazio vuoto (lett. scuro) • **entanglement** = una trappola aggrovigliata (lett. un intrico) • **lustfully** = presi da libidine • **prurient and lewd details** = dettagli indecenti e pruriginosi • **coughed** = tossì •

“Dedé is a very passionate woman, Don Iago, a very demanding female who can suck out of you the very essence of your own soul with only one hour of jolly bedfellowship. But I am young, you see, and healthy. Moreover, I am warm blooded. I am also much more vigorous in love-making than I may show by my appearance. Believe me, dear sir, I would not belittle myself if I assert that I can perfectly ride the most fiery mare, any sort of steed actually, that perchance comes between my legs, if you know what I mean...”

Politely, Iago showed some surprise. The young Cassio went on: ***“And yet, while she was very satisfied with my performances, I grew tired of her concupiscence. If her lascivious wantonness could satiate the base carnal needs of my youth, my eyes were now sighting a much fairer and gentler person, here in the castle. A honourable and sound person, believe me, who inspired into my soul a sentiment of friendship and respectful admiration. Alas, there were obstacles, however, unsurmount-***