

Anna Maria Ortese

A Pawnshop in Naples

THE bus that should have left me off at Via Duomo, where San Biagio dei Librai begins, was so jammed that I couldn't get down in time, and when I finally set foot on the ground, there before me was the squalid front of the railroad station, the monument to Garibaldi, and a cavalcade of faded green tram-cars, black, broken-down taxis, carriages drawn by small horses now fast asleep. I turned and walked back to Via Pietro Coletta, in the famed Tribunali district. The sky was clear blue, glittering, and beneath this light people were confusedly coming and going among buildings that rose up here and there, without any apparent order, like clouds. At the entrance to the Forcella section I stopped, perplexed. Further ahead, at the top of a narrow passage, there was a great bustle, a waving of colours among which bright red and black stood out most of all, a dolorous buzzing of voices. I thought a market, a street brawl. An old woman was seated next to a stone at the angle of the street and I stopped to ask her what all those people were doing. She raised a face enclosed in a large black handkerchief and pitted with smallpox, gazed also at that distant streak of sun in the centre of Forcella where that horde swelled like a snake and out of which came that intermittent dolorous hum. "They're not doing anything," she said quietly, "You're dreaming."

For years I hadn't gone down there and I had forgotten that Forcella, along with San Biagio dei Librai, is one of Naples' most thickly crowded streets, where the people's mere passing often gives you the sense of an extraordinary event. Through a veil of dust the sun was

diffusing a reddish, no longer gay light. From the doorways of hundreds of small shops, or from chairs set out on the sidewalks, women and children watched this sun with a strange stupefied air. Even the donkeys hitched to the vegetable wagons seemed to be struck by this light's peculiar thickness, and, with the patience of apathy, kept flicking their long ears to chase away the flies. From a tiny hand-cart like those used by street-cleaners, momentarily abandoned in the middle of the street, a head emerged; down below it was the trunk of a man about fifty, neatly clad in a jacket buttoned up to the neck and sewn at bottom and sides as a sack is sewn. A gilt plate tied on his chest with string invited the passers-by to drop alms there, but no one noticed it and, to tell the truth, even the man himself did nothing to arouse the public's compassion. His wine-ruddy cheek leaning against a bag, his ears also shot red, positively glowing, from wine, with grey hair raining down over his eyebrows and a delicate smile on his half-open mouth, this citizen of Naples was sleeping. Meanwhile, on every side, male and female dwarfs were walking past, dressed decorously in black, with pallid contorted faces, great wretched eyes, their fingers like twigs at their breasts, taking pains to avoid children and dogs that came clashing against them. Other beggars and cripples lay stretched out on the pavement, the picture of this or that patron saint resting under their chins, or a sign that listed their misfortunes and children. They were waiting sedately, dreaming. Some church bells rang out loudly, summoning these souls to Mass.

Coming out of Forcella at Via Duomo the crowd seemed more ordered and somehow silent, yet soon it thronged again on San Biagio dei Librai, which could be considered a prolongation of Forcella. . . . That carpet of flesh which, even as I entered San Biagio dei Librai, had appeared so very thick, now, on the spot, no longer existed, or at least was not so hallucinatory, in much the way that a fresco alters when you come up close to it. But one thing was left: as I had felt on Forcella, I had never seen so many people together, walking or standing still, meeting or fleeing each other, calling greetings from windows and shops, proposing the price of a piece of goods or crying out an entreaty—all in the same soft, broken, singing voice, though more on the note of lamentation than that much-talked-about Neapolitan gaiety. What chiefly dismayed you was the number of children, a force burst from the unconscious, and, to him who could see the black halo encircling their heads, absolutely uncontrolled and unblest. Every so often one of these children popped out from a hole at the pavement's level, moved forward with a few tiny steps, like a mouse, and then swiftly went back inside. The alleyways that cut across this street, itself so narrow and eroded, were still narrower and worn away. I could see the sheets of laundry with which Neapolitan tradition is so flutteringly full, but only the black apertures where they had once been hanging: windows, doors, balconies with a tin can in which a sprig of lemon verbena was yellowingly withering, inviting you to peer through these miserable panes in search of walls, furnishings, perhaps small windows flung open and flowering with the green of an inside garden. But not a thing did you see except a confused tangle of assorted objects—blankets, or fragments of straw baskets, pots and chairs—over which, like a sacred image smudged by time, protruded a woman's yellow cheekbones, staring, pensive eyes, the black crown of her hair caught together on her head with a hairpin, and thin arms joined across her lap. On the alleyway's floor—a Persian carpet now frazzled down to clots and filaments—lay bits of the most varied garbage, and in the midst of this, too, there sprouted other little children's

forms, pale and swollen or bizarrely thin, with huge shaved heads and tender eyes. Few were dressed, most of them wore only an undershirt pulled down over their bellies, and almost all went without shoes or wore ancient sandals held together by string. One child played with a tin can. Another, on the ground, was carefully spreading dust over his face. Some other children seemed to be involved in constructing a miniature altar, with a stone and on top a paper saint, and there was one who, gracefully mimicking a priest, was turning in an arc, giving the benediction.

THE suavety of those faces figuring forth Madonnas and Christ-children, Virgins and Martyrs, bent over a gilded cradle beflowered and veiled by very very fine lace, that appeared in almost all the shops along San Biagio dei Librai, clashed with the savage hardness of the alleys, in whose reality not the smallest trace of such tenderness lived.

You didn't have to know much to realise that in this place the feelings of family affection had been a cult, and precisely because of this had degenerated into vice and madness. At the end, a race emptied of all logic and all reason had clung to this shapeless tumult of feelings and had now become shadow, neurasthenia, weakness, resigned fear and impudent gaiety. A formless poverty, silent as a spider, was in its own way weaving and unweaving those miserable threads, entangling ever more the lowest strata of the plebs, which here is queen. This population grew, spread, always more bloodless, frightfully confounding the ideas of the Public Administration at the same time as it inflated with weird pride and even weirder hopes the hearts of the priests. Here, the sea did not border Naples. I was certain that none of these people had ever seen the sea or could remember it. In this dark, dark ditch nothing flashed but the fires of sex, beneath the black sky of the supernatural.

Being midday, and since in the preceding days it had rained at that hour, I glanced at the sky and saw it was covered with a veil of cottonish mist which soon caused the houses' shadows and the already very short shadows of the people to grow less sharp and heavy. In

front of me some women were walking, preceded by two very tall priests, whose waxen hands were closed around books of red leather and who soon, with a rustle of soutanes, vanished under a portico. The women carried white bundles and kept looking around them, talking in sighing whispers. When they reached the church of San Nicola, they made the sign of the cross and then entered the courtyard which opened out before the church.

"*O Magnum Pietatis Opus*" was written on the huge front of the building at the courtyard's rear. Its lifeless grey façade was similar to those of all the hospitals and old people's homes in Naples' poor quarters; yet behind it, instead of beds, were ranged the counters and grills of the pawnshop—the Bank of Naples' "great work of compassion."

WHEN I got up to the pawnshop on the building's second floor, before one of the most majestic doors I have ever seen, there were various little groups already on the stairway, some sitting on the steps, others on their bundles: these were the pregnant women, the old, the sickly ones, those who couldn't stand up any longer and had begged a relative or a friend to hold their place for them in the queue.

I pushed through the door, carefully making my way forward among the bodies, and I found myself in an immense hall with a very high ceiling, illuminated by two wings of very large windows, each window topped by another equally large, square in shape and hermetically closed. In the window embrasures there hung down, like the thinnest of rags, long threads of spider-webs.

It was the hall set apart for the pledging of valuables.

A great crowd, only approximately disposed in line, was milling wildly before the cages of the "New Pledges." There was a vast tumult because just this morning the order had arrived to give as little as possible for each pledge. Lemon-coloured faces, hooded in ugly "perms," were turning and re-turning with a deluded air, in their hands the grey pawn-sheet. An enormous old woman, all belly, her eyes inflamed, cried ostentatiously, kissing a necklace again and again before handing it over.

Other women and a few men with sharp-pointed faces waited composedly on a black bench set against the wall. On the floor some children in undershirts were playing.

"Nunzio Apicella!" a clerk's voice shouted towards the scanty line of those redeeming their pawns. "Aspasia De Fonzo!" From time to time the shouts continued, overlaid by the grieving drone of the people discussing the new regulation and unable to resign themselves to it. A black-mustached policeman with large, languid eyes, who wore his uniform like a bathrobe, walked up and down, indifferent and bored, now and then pretending to put the queue in order again with his hands. He was talking with someone when the great door of the hall burst open violently, and there entered a squat, red-haired woman of about forty, dressed in black and dragging with her two extremely white children. This unhappy woman, whose name and profession I discovered later—Antonietta De Liguoro, haberdasher—had learned in the street that the Bank, in which she was going to pawn a necklace, was that day closing early, and that they might not let her in. Her face flaming red, congested, her blue eyes starting out of their sockets, she beseeched everyone to do her this favour, for she must pawn her necklace before closing-time, since her husband had to leave for Turin where her oldest son was gravely ill. Nothing could quiet her. Even when they had assured her that she could immediately get into the line, she continued to sob and cry: "Help me, Mother of Carmine!" Many of these women on the line, having forgotten their heavy sadness of a moment before, now turned to her, the furthest away calling to her with sympathy and support, the closest touching her shoulder, her hands, adjusting her hair with their hair-pins; not to speak of the attention lavished on the two children, the long-drawn-out and slightly theatrical scene of maternal clucking. These two children, who were no more than three or four years old and thin and pallid as worms, wore on their wax-like faces certain little smiles so old and cynical as to strike one with amazement, and every so often they would shoot out a glance, both malicious and questioning, at their frenetic mother. A kind of popular movement

swiftly swept that woman—about whom everyone soon knew the smallest detail—up to the counter, leaping over the ferocious bureaucracy of “the turn.” And this is the dialogue that reached my ears:

Clerk, after having looked at the necklace, dryly:
Three thousand eight hundred lire.

The Haberdasher-Lady: I beg you, make it four thousand.

Clerk: My daughter, that’s the regulation.

Haberdasher-Lady: But my husband must take the train, I implore you, we have a sick son and these two little creatures here. Do it for Our Sorrowing Lady.

Clerk, very calm: If you want it, it’s three thousand—Amedeo, tell Salvatore to bring another coffee, without sugar. . . .

Her eyes burning, though now perfectly dry, Antonietta De Liguoro passed again through all the others, proudly disregarding or perhaps not even seeing them because of her anguish, the very ones who just a moment ago had offered her the solace of their Christian pity. The two children ran after her, their little hands clutching at her dress, and she did not seem to notice.

“THAT woman there,” the policeman said to a young man who had the look of a student and was carrying a red bag under his arm out of which stuck the fringe of a towel, “It’s a year that her husband is leaving on the train for Turin. . . . She has nobody in Turin, she doesn’t even have a husband, she doesn’t

want to stand in the queue . . . and I don’t say a word to her. . . .” His eyes followed the clever haberdasher, who now, having made a short stop at the cashier’s counter, was escaping to the door, her money and the grey sheet of the pawn-ticket tight against her breast. Squalid and compassionate, the crowd forgot itself to accompany the presumed victim with remarks of consolation and indignation against an old injustice, which seemed just now revealing itself to them: “May Jesus Christ comfort her . . . Mother of Carmine help her . . . God puts salt on the wound . . .,” glancing meanwhile with looks of abstract hate at the cages.

Now the clerk’s indifferent voice had again begun calling out: “Di Vincenzo Maria . . . Fusco Addolorata . . . Della Morte Carmela.” Suddenly a deep silence fell, then a startled murmur, full of childlike astonishment, ran through the three files of “New Pledges.” “What’s going on?” asked a clerk, leaning out of his cubby-hole. A brownish butterfly with many, many threads of gold on its wings and back had entered, God knows how, from the door of the stairway, flying over that throng of heads, bent shoulders, troubled faces; and now . . . fluttering . . . rising . . . happy . . . unmemoried . . . undecided about alighting in any particular place. “Oh! Oh! Oh!” they all gasped.

“Look, see the garden!” a mother cried to her infant who was crying slowly, his head against her shoulder. Near the door, her mouth stuffed with bread, an old misshapen woman was singing.

(Translated from the Italian by Raymond Rosenthal.)