

INTRODUCTION TO THE PRINCE

MAY, 1860

“Nunc et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen.”

The daily recital of the Rosary was over. For half an hour the steady voice of the Prince had recalled the Sorrowful and the Glorious Mysteries; for half an hour other voices had interwoven a lilting hum from which, now and again, would chime some unlikely word; love, virginity, death; and during that hum the whole aspect of the rococo drawing-room seemed to change; even the parrots spreading iridescent wings over the silken walls appeared abashed; even the Magdalen between the two windows looked a penitent and not just a handsome blonde lost in some dubious daydream as she usually was.

Now, as the voices fell silent, everything dropped back into its usual order or disorder. Bencicò, the Great Dane, grieved at exclusion, came wagging its tail through the door by which the servants had left. The women rose slowly to their feet, their oscillating skirts as they withdrew baring bit by bit the naked figures from mythology painted all over the milky depths of the tiles. Only an Andromeda remained covered by the soutane of Father Pirrone, still deep in extra prayer, and it was some time before she could sight the silvery Perseus swooping down to her aid and her kiss.

The divinities frescoed on the ceiling awoke. The troops of Tritons and Dryads, hurtling across from hill and sea amid clouds of cyclamen pink towards a transfigured Conca d'Oro and bent on glorifying the House of Salina, seemed suddenly so overwhelmed with exaltation as to discard the most elementary rules of perspective; meanwhile the major Gods and Goddesses, the Princes among Gods, thunderous Jove and frowning Mars and languid Venus, had already preceded the mob of minor

deities and were amiably supporting the blue armorial shield of the Leopard. They knew that for the next twenty-three and a half hours they would be lords of the villa once again. On the walls the monkeys went back to pulling faces at the cockatoos.

Beneath this Palermitan Olympus the mortals of the Salina family were also dropping speedily from mystic spheres. The girls resettled the folds in their dresses, exchanged blue-eyed glances and snatches of school-girl slang; for over a month, ever since the outbreaks of the Fourth of April, they had been home for safety's sake from their convent, and regretting the canopied dormitories and collective cosiness of the Holy Redeemer. The boys were already scuffling with each other for possession of a medal of San Francesco di Paola; the eldest, the heir, the young Duke Paolo, longing to smoke and afraid of doing so in his parents' presence, was squeezing through his pocket the braided straw of his cigar-case. His gaunt face was veiled in brooding melancholy; it had been a bad day; Guiscard, his Irish sorrel, had seemed off form, and Fanny had apparently been unable (or unwilling) to send him her usual lilac-tinted billet-doux. Of what avail then, to him, was the Incarnation of his Saviour?

Restless and domineering, the Princess dropped her rosary brusquely into her jet-fringed bag, while her fine crazy eyes glanced round at her slaves of children and her tyrant of a husband, over whom her diminutive body yearned vainly for loving dominion.

Meanwhile he himself, the Prince, had risen to his feet; the sudden movement of his huge frame made the floor tremble, and a glint of pride flashed in his light-blue eyes at this fleeting confirmation of his lordship over both humans and their works.

Now he was settling the huge scarlet missal on the chair which had been put in front of him during his recitation of the Rosary, putting back the handkerchief on which he had been kneeling, and a touch of irritation clouded his brow as his eye fell on a tiny coffee stain which had had the presumption, since that morning, to fleck the vast white expanse of his waistcoat.

Not that he was fat; just very large and very strong; in houses

inhabited by common mortals his head would touch the lowest rosette on the chandeliers; his fingers could twist a ducat coin as if it were mere paper; and there was constant coming and going between Villa Salina and a silversmith's for the straightening of forks and spoons which, in some fit of controlled rage at table, he had coiled into a hoop. But those fingers could also stroke and knead with the most exquisite delicacy, as his wife Maria Stella knew to her cost; while up in his private observatory at the top of the house the gleaming screws, caps and studs of telescopes, lenses and "comet-finders" seemed inviolate beneath his gentle manipulations.

The rays of the westering sun, still high on that May afternoon, lit up the Prince's rosy hue and honey-coloured skin; these betrayed the German origin of his mother, the Princess Carolina whose haughtiness had frozen the easy-going court of the Two Sicilies thirty years before. But in his blood also fermented other German strains particularly disturbing to a Sicilian aristocrat in the year 1860, however attractive his fair skin and hair amid all that olive and black; an authoritarian temperament, a certain rigidity of morals, and a propensity for abstract ideas; these, in the relaxing atmosphere of Palermo society, had changed respectively into capricious arrogance, recurring moral scruples and contempt for his own relatives and friends, all of whom seemed to him mere driftwood in the languid meandering stream of Sicilian pragmatism.

In a family which for centuries had been incapable even of adding up their own expenditure and subtracting their own debts he was the first (and last) to have a genuine bent for mathematics; this he had applied to astronomy, and by his work gained a certain official recognition and a great deal of personal pleasure. In his mind, now, pride and mathematical analysis were so linked as to give him an illusion that the stars obeyed his calculations too (as, in fact, they seemed to be doing) and that the two small planets which he had discovered (Salina and Speedy he had called them, after his main estate and a shooting-dog he had been particularly fond of) would spread the fame of

his family throughout the empty spaces between Mars and Jupiter, thus transforming the frescoes in the villa from the adulatory to the prophetic.

Between the pride and intellectuality of his mother and the sensuality and irresponsibility of his father, poor Prince Fabrizio lived in perpetual discontent under his Jove-like frown, watching the ruin of his own class and his own inheritance without ever making, still less wanting to make, any move towards saving it.

That half hour between Rosary and dinner was one of the least irritating moments of his day, and for hours beforehand he would savour its rather uncertain calm.

With a wildly excited Bencicò bounding ahead of him he went down the short flight of steps into the garden. Enclosed between three walls and a side of the house its seclusion gave it the air of a cemetery, accentuated by the parallel little mounds bounding the irrigation canals and looking like the graves of very tall, very thin giants. Plants were growing in thick disorder on the reddish clay; flowers sprouted in all directions: and the myrtle hedges seemed put there to prevent movement rather than guide it. At the end a statue of Flora speckled with yellow-black lichen exhibited her centuries-old charms with an air of resignation; on each side were benches holding quilted cushions, also of grey marble; and in a corner the gold of an acacia tree introduced a sudden note of gaiety. Every sod seemed to exude a yearning for beauty soon muted by languor.

But the garden, hemmed and almost squashed between these barriers, was exhaling scents that were cloying, fleshy and slightly putrid, like the aromatic liquids distilled from the relics of certain saints; the carnations superimposed their pungence on the formal fragrance of roses and the oily emanations of magnolias drooping in corners; and somewhere beneath it all was a faint smell of mint mingling with a nursery whiff of acacia and a jammy one of myrtle; from a grove beyond the wall came an erotic waft of early orange-blossom.

It was a garden for the blind: a constant offence to the eyes, a

pleasure strong if somewhat crude to the nose. The *Paul Neyron* roses, whose cuttings he had himself bought in Paris, had degenerated; first stimulated and then enfeebled by the strong if languid pull of Sicilian earth, burnt by apocalyptic Julys, they had changed into objects like flesh-coloured cabbages, obscene and distilling a dense almost indecent scent which no French horticulturist would have dared hope for. The Prince put one under his nose and seemed to be sniffing the thigh of a dancer from the Opera. Bendicò, to whom it was also proffered, drew back in disgust and hurried off in search of healthier sensations amid dead lizards and manure.

But the heavy scents of the garden brought on a gloomy train of thought for the Prince: "It smells all right here now; but a month ago . . ."

He remembered the nausea diffused throughout the entire villa by certain sweetish odours before their cause was traced: the corpse of a young soldier of the Fifth Regiment of Sharpshooters who had been wounded in the skirmish with the rebels at San Lorenzo and come up there to die, all alone, under a lemon tree. They had found him lying face downwards in the thick clover, his face covered in blood and vomit, crawling with ants, his nails dug into the soil; a pile of purplish intestines had formed a puddle under his bandoleer. Russo the agent had discovered this object, turned it over, covered its face with his red handkerchief, thrust the guts back into the gaping stomach with some twigs, and then covered the wound with the blue flaps of the cloak; spitting continuously with disgust, meanwhile, not right on, but very near the body. And all this with meticulous care. "Those swine stink even when they're dead." It had been the only epitaph to that derelict death.

After bemused fellow-soldiers had taken the body away (and yes, dragged it along by the shoulders to a cart so that the puppet's stuffing fell out again), a *De Profundis* for the soul of the unknown youth was added to the evening Rosary; and now that the conscience of the ladies in the house seemed placated, the subject was never mentioned again.

The Prince went and scratched a little lichen off the feet of the Flora and then began to stroll up and down; the lowering sun threw an immense shadow of him over the grave-like flowerbeds.

No, the dead man had not been mentioned again; and anyway soldiers presumably become soldiers for exactly that, to die in defence of their king. But the image of that gutted corpse often recurred, as if asking to be given peace in the only possible way the Prince could give it; by justifying that last agony on grounds of general necessity. And then around would rise other even less attractive ghosts. Dying for somebody or for something, that was perfectly normal, of course: but the person dying should know, or at least feel sure, that someone knows for whom or for what he is dying; the disfigured face was asking just that; and that was where the haze began.

“He died for the King, of course, my dear Fabrizio, obviously,” would have been the answer of his brother-in-law Málvica had the Prince asked him, and Málvica was always the chosen spokesman of most of their friends. “For the King, who stands for order, continuity, decency, honour, right; for the King, who is sole defender of the Church, sole bulwark against the dispersal of property, the ‘Sect’s’ eventual aim.” Fine words, these, pointing to all that lay dearest and deepest in the Prince’s heart. But there was, even so, something that didn’t quite ring true. The King, all right. He knew the King well or rather the one who had just died; the present one was only a seminarist dressed up as a general. And the old King had really not been worth much. “But you’re not reasoning, my dear Fabrizio,” Málvica would reply, “one particular sovereign may not be up to it, yet the idea of monarchy is still the same; it is not connected with personalities.”

That was true, too; but kings who personify an idea should not, cannot, fall below a certain level for generations; if they do, my dear brother-in-law, the idea suffers too.

He was sitting on a bench, inertly watching the devastation wrought by Bencicò in the flowerbeds; every now and again the dog would turn innocent eyes towards him as if asking for praise

at labour done: fourteen carnations broken off, half a hedge torn apart, an irrigation channel blocked. How human!

“Good Bendicò, come here.” And the animal hurried up and put its earthy nostrils into his hand, anxious to show it had forgiven this silly interruption of a fine job of work.

Those audiences! All those audiences granted him by King Ferdinand at Caserta, at Capodimonte, at Portici, Naples, anywhere at all.

Beside the chamberlain on duty, chatting as he guided with a cocked hat under an arm and the latest Neapolitan slang on his lips, they would move through innumerable rooms of superb architecture and revolting décor (just like the Bourbon monarchy itself), plunge into dirty passages and up ill-kept stairs, and finally emerge into an ante-chamber filled with waiting people; closed faces of police spies, avid faces of petitioners. The chamberlain apologised, pushed through this mob, and led him towards another ante-chamber reserved for members of the Court; a little blue and silver room of the period of Charles III. After a short wait a lackey tapped at the door and they were admitted into the August Presence.

The private study was small and consciously simple; on the white-washed walls hung a portrait of King Francis I and one, with an acid ill-tempered expression, of the reigning Queen; above the mantelpiece was a Madonna by Andrea del Sarto looking astounded at finding herself in the company of coloured lithographs representing obscure Neapolitan saints and sanctuaries; on a side table stood a wax statuette of the Child Jesus with a votive light before it; and the modest desk was heaped with papers, white, yellow and blue; the whole administration of the kingdom here attained its final phase, that of signature by His Majesty (D.G.).

Behind this paper barricade was the King. He was already standing so as not to be seen getting up; the King with his pallid heavy face between fairish side-whiskers, with his rough cloth military jacket under which burst a purple cataract of trousers.

He gave a step forward with his right hand out and bent for the hand-kiss which he would then refuse.

“Well, Salina, blessings on you!” His Neapolitan accent was far stronger than the chamberlain’s.

“I must beg Your Majesty to excuse me for not wearing court dress; I am only just passing through Naples; but I did not wish to forgo paying my respects to Your Revered Person.”

“Nonsense, Salina, nonsense: you know you’re always at home here at Caserta.

“At home, of course,” he repeated, sitting down behind the desk and waiting a second before indicating to his guest to sit down too.

“And how are the little girls?” The Prince realised that now was the moment to produce a play on words both salacious and edifying.

“Little girls, Your Majesty? At my age and under the sacred bonds of matrimony?”

The King’s mouth laughed as his hands primly settled the papers before him. “Those I’d never let myself refer to, Salina. I was asking about your little daughters, your little princesses. Concetta, now, that dear godchild of ours, she must be getting quite big, isn’t she, almost grown up?”

From family he passed to science. “Salina, you’re an honour not only to yourself but to the whole kingdom! A fine thing, science, unless it takes to attacking religion!” After this, however, the mask of the Friend was put aside, and in its place assumed that of the Severe Sovereign. “Tell me, Salina, what do they think of Castelcicala down in Sicily?”

Salina had never heard a good word for the Lieutenant-General of Sicily from either Royalists or Liberals, but not wanting to let a friend down he parried and kept to generalities. “A great gentleman, a true hero, maybe a little old for the fatigues of the Lieutenant-Generalcy . . .”

The King’s face darkened; Salina was refusing to act the spy. So Salina was no use to him. Leaning both hands on his desk he prepared the dismissal: “I’ve so much work! the whole

Kingdom rests on these shoulders of mine.” Now for a bit of sweetening: out of the drawer came the friendly mask again. “When you pass through Naples next, Salina, come and show your Concetta to the Queen. She’s too young to be presented, I know, but there’s nothing against our arranging a little dinner for her, is there? Sweets to the sweet, as they say. Well, Salina, ’bye and be good!”

On one occasion, though, the dismissal had not been so amiable. The Prince had made his second bow while backing out when the King called after him, “Hey, Salina, listen. They tell me you’ve some odd friends in Palermo. That nephew of yours, Falconeri . . . Why don’t you knock some sense into him?”

“But, Your Majesty, Tancredi thinks of nothing but women and cards.”

The King lost patience; “Take care, Salina, take care. You’re responsible, remember, you’re his guardian. Tell him to look after that neck of his. You may withdraw.”

Repassing now through the sumptuously second-rate rooms on his way to sign the Queen’s book, he felt suddenly discouraged. That plebeian cordiality had depressed him as much as the police grins. Lucky those who could interpret such familiarity as friendship, such threats as royal might. He could not. And as he exchanged gossip with the impeccable chamberlain he was asking himself what was destined to succeed this monarchy which bore the marks of death upon its face. The Piedmontese, the so-called *Galantuomo* who was getting himself so talked of from that little out-of-the-way capital of his? Wouldn’t things be just the same? Just Torinese instead of Neapolitan dialect; that’s all.

He had reached the book. He signed: Fabrizio Corbera, Prince of Salina.

Or maybe the Republic of Don Peppino Mazzini? “No thanks. I’d just be plain Signor Corbera.”

And the long jog back to Naples did not soothe him. Nor even the thought of an appointment with Cora Danolo.

This being the case, then, what should he do? Just cling to the

status quo and avoid leaps in the dark? Then he would have to put up with more rattle of firing-squads like that which had resounded a short time before through a squalid square in Palermo; and what use were they, anyway? "One never achieves anything by going bang! bang! Does one, Bencicò?"

"Ding! Ding! Ding!" rang the bell for dinner. Bencicò rushed ahead with mouth watering in anticipation. "Just like a Piedmontese!" thought Salina as he moved back up the steps.

Dinner at Villa Salina was served with the slightly shabby grandeur then customary in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. The number of those taking part (fourteen in all, with the master and mistress of the house, children, governesses and tutors) was itself enough to give the dining-table an imposing air. Covered with a fine but mended lace cloth, it glittered under a powerful carcel-lamp hung precariously under the Murano chandelier. Daylight was still streaming through the windows, but the white figures in painted bas-relief against the dark backgrounds of the door-mantels were already lost in shadow. The silver was massive and the glass splendid, bearing on smooth medallions amid cut Bohemian ware the initials F.D. (*Ferdinandus dedit*) in memory of royal munificence; but the plates, each signed by an illustrious artist, were mere survivors of many a scullion's massacre and originated from different services. The biggest, vaguely Capodimonte, their wide almond-green borders engraved with little gilt anchors, were reserved for the Prince, who liked everything round him to be on his own scale except his wife.

When he entered the dining-room the whole party was already assembled, only the Princess sitting, the rest standing behind their chairs. Opposite his own chair, flanked by a pile of plates, swelled the silver flanks of the enormous soup tureen with its cover surmounted by a prancing Leopard. The Prince ladled out the *minestra* himself, a pleasant chore, symbol of his proud duties as paterfamilias. That evening, though, there came a sound that had not been heard for some time, a threatening

tinkle of the ladle against a side of the tureen; sign of great though still controlled anger, one of the most terrifying sounds in the world, as one of his sons used to call it even forty years later. The Prince had noticed that the sixteen-year-old Francesco Paolo was not in his place. The lad entered at once ("Excuse me, Papa") and sat down. He was not reproved, but Father Pirrone, whose duties were more or less those of sheep-dog, bent his head and muttered a prayer. The bomb did not explode, but the gust from its passage had swept the table and ruined the dinner all the same. As they ate in silence the Prince's blue eyes, narrowed behind half-closed lids, stared at his children one by one and numbed them with fear.

But, "A fine family," he was thinking. The girls plump, glowing, with gay little dimples, and between the forehead and nose that frown which was the hereditary mark of the Salina; the males slim but wiry, wearing an expression of fashionable melancholy as they wielded knives and forks with subdued violence. One of them had been away for two years: Giovanni, the second son, the most loved, the most difficult. One fine day he had vanished from home and there had been no news of him for two months. Then a cold but respectful letter arrived from London with apologies for any anxiety he had caused, reassurances about his health, and the strange statement that he preferred a modest life as clerk in a coal depot to a pampered (read: "fettered") existence in the ease of Palermo. Often a twinge of anxiety for the errant youth in that foggy and heretical city would prick the Prince's heart and torture him. His face grew darker than ever.

It grew so dark that the Princess, sitting next to him, put out her childlike hand and stroked the powerful paw reposing on the tablecloth. A thoughtless gesture, which loosed a whole chain of reactions in him; irritation at being pitied, then a surge of sensuality, not however directed towards her who had aroused it. Into the Prince's mind flashed a picture of Mariannina with her head deep in a pillow. He raised a dry voice: "Domenico," he said to a lackey, "go and tell Don Antonio to harness the bays in the

brougham; I'll be going down to Palermo immediately after dinner." A glance into his wife's eyes, which had gone glassy, made him regret his order: but as it was quite out of the question to withdraw instructions already given, he persevered and even added a jeer to his cruelty; "Father Pirrone, you will come with me; we'll be back by eleven; you can spend a couple of hours at your Mother-house with your friends."

There could obviously be no valid reason for visiting Palermo at night in those disordered times, except some low love-adventure; and taking the family chaplain as companion was sheer offensive arrogance. So at least Father Pirrone felt, and was offended, though of course he acquiesced.

The last medlar had scarcely been eaten when the carriage wheels were heard crunching under the porch; in the hall, as a lackey handed the Prince his top hat and the Jesuit his tricorne, the Princess, now on the verge of tears, made a last attempt to hold him—vain as ever: "But Fabrizio, in times like these . . . with the streets full of soldiers, of hooligans . . . why, anything might happen."

"Nonsense," he snapped, "nonsense, Stella; what could happen? Everyone knows me; there aren't many men as tall in Palermo. I'll see you later." And he placed a hurried kiss on her still unfurrowed brow which was level with his chin. But, whether the smell of the Princess's skin had called up tender memories, or whether the penitential steps of Father Pirrone behind him evoked pious warnings, on reaching the carriage door he very nearly did countermand the trip. At that moment, just as he was opening his mouth to order the carriage back to the stables, a loud shriek of "Fabrizio, my Fabrizio!" followed by a scream, reached him from the window above. The Princess was having one of her fits of hysteria. "Drive on," said he to the coachman on the box holding a whip diagonally across his paunch. "Drive on, down to Palermo and leave Father at his Mother-house," and he banged the carriage door before the lackey could shut it.

It was not dark yet and the road meandered on, very white, deep between high walls. As they came out of the Salina property they passed on the left the half-ruined Falconeri villa, owned by Tancredi, his nephew and ward. A spendthrift father, married to the Prince's sister, had squandered his whole fortune and then died. It was one of those total ruins which engulfed even the silver braid on liveries; and when the widow died the King had conferred the guardianship of her son, then aged fourteen, on his uncle Salina. The lad, scarcely known before, had become very dear to the irascible Prince, who perceived in him a riotous zest for life and a frivolous temperament contradicted by sudden serious moods. Though the Prince never admitted it to himself, he would have preferred the lad as his heir to that booby Paolo. Now, at twenty-one, Tancredi was enjoying life on the money which his uncle never grudged him, even from his own pocket. "I wonder what the silly boy is up to now?" thought the Prince as they drove past Villa Falconeri, whose huge bougainvillea cascaded over the gates like swags of episcopal silk, lending a deceptive air of gaiety to the dark.

"What is he up to now?" For King Ferdinand, in speaking of the young man's undesirable acquaintances, had been wrong to mention the matter but right in his facts. Swept up in a circle of gamblers and so-called "light" ladies, all dominated by his slim charm, Tancredi had actually got to the point of sympathising with the "Sect" and getting in touch with the secret National Committee; maybe he drew money from them as well as from the Royal coffers. It had taken the Prince a great deal of labour and trouble, visits to a sceptical Castelcicala and an over-polite Maniscalco, to prevent the youth getting into real trouble after the 4th of April "riots". That hadn't been too good; on the other hand Tancredi could never do wrong in his uncle's eyes: so the real fault lay with the times, these confused times in which a young man of good family wasn't even free to play a game of faro without involving himself with compromising acquaintanceships. Bad times.

"Bad times, Your Excellency." The voice of Father Pirrone

sounded like an echo of his thoughts. Squeezed into a corner of the brougham, hemmed in by the massive Prince, subject to that same Prince's bullying, the Jesuit was suffering in body and conscience, and, being a man of parts himself, was now transposing his own ephemeral discomfort into the perennial realms of history. "Look, Excellency," and he pointed to the mountain heights around the Conca d'Oro still visible in the last dusk. On their slopes and peaks glimmered dozens of flickering lights, bonfires lit every night by the rebel bands, silent threats to the city of palaces and convents. They looked like lights that burn in sick-rooms during the final nights.

"I can see, Father, I can see," and it occurred to him that perhaps Tancredi was beside one of those ill-omened fires, his aristocratic hands stoking on twigs being burnt to damage just such hands as his. "A fine guardian I am, with my ward up to any nonsense that passes through his head."

The road was now beginning to slope gently downhill and Palermo could be seen very close, plunged in total darkness, its low shuttered houses weighed down by the huge edifices of convents and monasteries. There were dozens of these, all vast, often grouped in twos or threes, for women and for men, for rich and poor, nobles and plebeians, for Jesuits, Benedictines, Franciscans, Capuchins, Carmelites, Liguorians, Augustinians . . . Here and there squat domes rose higher, in flaccid curves like breasts emptied of milk; but it was the religious houses which gave the city its grimness and its character, its sedateness and also the sense of death which not even the vibrant Sicilian light could ever manage to disperse. And at that hour, at night, they were despots of the scene. It was against them really that the bonfires were lit on the hills, stoked by men who were themselves very like those living in the monasteries below, as fanatical, as self-absorbed, as avid for power or rather for the idleness which was, for them, the purpose of power.

This was what the Prince was thinking as the bays trotted down the slope; thoughts in contrast to his real self, caused by anxiety about Tancredi and by the sensual urge which turned

him against the restrictions embodied by religious houses.

Now the road was crossing orange groves in flower, and the nuptial scent of the blossoms absorbed the rest as a full moon does a landscape; the smell of sweating horses, the smell of leather from the carriage upholstery, the smell of Prince and the smell of Jesuit, were all cancelled out by that Islamic perfume evoking houris and fleshly joys beyond the grave.

It even touched Father Pirrone. "How lovely this would be, Excellency, if . . ."

"If there weren't so many Jesuits," thought the Prince, his delicious anticipations interrupted by the priest's voice. At once he regretted this rudeness of thought, and his big hand tapped his old friend's tricorne.

Where the suburbs began, at Villa Airoidi, the carriage was stopped by a patrol. Voices from Apulia, voices from Naples, called a halt, bayonets glittered under a wavering lantern; but a sergeant soon recognised the Prince sitting there with his top hat on his knees. "Excuse us, Excellency, pass on." And a soldier was even told to get up on to the box so that the carriage would have no more trouble at other block posts. The loaded carriage moved on more slowly, round Villa Ranchibile, through Torrerosse and the orchards of Villafranca, and entered the city by Porta Maqueda. Outside the Caffè Romeres at the *Quattro Canti di Campagna* officers from units on guard were sitting laughing and eating huge ices. But that was the only sign of life in the entire city; the deserted streets echoed only to the rhythmic march of pickets on their rounds, passing with white bandoleers crossed over their chests. On each side were continuous monastery walls, the Monastery of the Mountain, of the Stigmata, of the Cross-Bearers, of the Theatines, massive, black as pitch, immersed in a sleep that seemed like the end of all things.

"I'll fetch you in a couple of hours, Father. Pray well."

And poor Pirrone knocked confusedly at the door of the Jesuit Mother-house, Casa Professa, as the brougham wheeled off down a side street.

Leaving the carriage at his palace, the Prince set off for his destination on foot. It was a short walk, but through a quarter of ill repute. Soldiers in full equipment, who had obviously just slipped away from the patrols bivouacked in the squares, were issuing with shining eyes from little houses on whose balconies pots of basil explained their ease of entry. Sinister-looking youths in wide trousers were quarrelling in the guttural grunts Sicilians use in anger. In the distance echoed shots from nervous sentries. Once past this district his route skirted the Cala; in the old fishing port decaying boats bobbed up and down, desolate as mangy dogs.

"I'm a sinner, I know, doubly a sinner, by Divine Law and by Stella's human love. There's no doubt of that, and to-morrow I'll go and confess to Father Pirrone." He smiled to himself at the thought that it might be superfluous, so certain must the Jesuit be of his sins of to-day. And then a spirit of quibble came over him again. "I'm sinning, it's true, but I'm sinning so as not to sin worse, to stop this sensual nagging, to tear this thorn out of my flesh and avoid worse trouble. That the Lord knows." Suddenly he was swept by a gust of tenderness towards himself. "I'm just a poor, weak creature," he thought as his heavy steps crunched the dirty gravel. "I'm weak and without support. Stella! oh, well, the Lord knows how much I've loved her; but I was married at twenty. And now she's too bossy, as well as too old." His moment of weakness passed. "But I've still got my vigour; and how can I find satisfaction with a woman who makes the sign of the Cross in bed before every embrace and then at the critical moment just cries, '*Gesummaria!*' When we married and she was sixteen I found that rather exalting; but now . . . seven children I've had with her, seven; and never once have I seen her navel. Is that right?" Now he was almost shouting, whipped by this odd anguish, "Is it right? I ask you all!" And he turned to the portico of the Catena. "Why, she's the real sinner!"

Comforted by this reassuring discovery he gave a firm knock at Mariannina's door.

Two hours later he was in his brougham on the way home with

Father Pirrone beside him. The latter was worried; his colleagues had been telling him about the political situation which was, it seemed, much tenser than it looked from the detached calm of Villa Salina. There was fear of a landing by the Piedmontese in the south of the island, near Sciacca; the authorities had noticed a silent ferment among the people; at the first sign of weakening control the city rabble would take to looting and rape. The Jesuit Fathers were thoroughly alarmed and three of them, the oldest, had left for Naples by the afternoon packet-boat, taking their archives with them. "May the Lord protect us and spare this holy Kingdom!"

The Prince scarcely listened. He was immersed in sated ease tinged with disgust. Mariannina had looked at him with her big opaque peasant's eyes, had refused him nothing, and been humble and compliant in every way. A kind of Benticò in a silk petticoat. In a moment of particularly intense pleasure he had heard her exclaim "My Prince!" He smiled again with satisfaction at the thought. Much better than "*mon chat*" or "*mon singe blond*" produced in equivalent moments by Sarah, the Parisian slut he had frequented three years ago when the Astronomical Congress gave him a gold medal at the Sorbonne. Better than "*mon chat*", no doubt of that; much better than "*Gesummaria!*"; no sacrilege at least. A good girl, Mariannina; next time he visited he'd bring her three lengths of crimson silk.

But how sad too: that manhandled, youthful flesh, that resigned lubricity; and what about him, what was he? A pig, just a pig! Suddenly there occurred to him a verse read by chance in a Paris bookshop while glancing at a volume by someone whose name he had forgotten, one of those poets the French incubate and forget next week. He could see once more the lemon-yellow pile of unsold copies, the page, an uneven page, and heard again the verses ending a jumble of a poem:

. . . *donnez-moi la force et le courage*
de contempler mon coeur et mon corps sans dégoût.

And as Father Pirrone went worrying on about a person called La Farina and another called Crispi, the Prince dozed off into a kind of tense euphoria, lulled by the trotting of the bays on whose plump flanks quivered the light from the carriage lamps. He woke up at the turning by Villa Falconeri. "Oh, he's a fine one too, tending bonfires that'll destroy him!"

In the matrimonial bedroom, glancing at poor Stella with her hair well tucked into her nightcap, sighing as she slept in the great brass bed, he felt touched. "Seven children she's given me and she's been mine alone." A faint whiff of valerian drifted through the room, last vestige of her crisis of hysterics. "Poor little Stella," he murmured pityingly as he climbed into bed. The hours passed and he could not sleep; a powerful hand was stoking three fires in his mind; Mariannina's caresses, those French verses, the threatening pyres on the hills.

Towards dawn, however, the Princess had occasion to make the sign of the Cross.

Next morning the sun lit on a refreshed Prince. He had taken his coffee and was shaving in front of the mirror in a red and black flowered dressing-gown. Bendicò was leaning a heavy head on one of his slippers. As he shaved his right cheek he noticed in the mirror a face behind his own, the face of a young man, thin and elegant with a shy, quizzical look. He did not turn round and went on shaving. "Well, Tancredi, where were you last night?"

"Good morning, Nuncle. Where was I? Oh, just out with friends. An innocent night. Not like a certain person I know who went down to Palermo for some fun!"

The Prince concentrated on shaving the difficult bit between lips and chin. His nephew's slightly nasal voice had such a youthful zest that it was impossible to be angry; but he might allow himself a touch of surprise. He turned and with his towel under his chin looked his nephew up and down. The young man was in shooting kit, a long tight jacket, high leggings. "And who was this person, may I ask?"

“Yourself, Nuncle, yourself. I saw you with my own eyes, at the Villa Airoldi block post, as you were talking to the sergeant. A fine thing at your age! With a priest too! Old rips!”

Really this was a little too insolent. Tancredi thought he could allow himself anything. Dark blue eyes, the eyes of his mother, his own eyes, gazed laughingly at him through half-closed lids. The Prince was offended; the boy didn’t know where to stop; but he could not bring himself to reprove him and anyway he was quite right. “Why are you dressed up like that, though? What’s on? A fancy-dress ball in the morning?”

The youth went serious; his triangular face took on an unexpectedly manly look. “I’m leaving, Uncle, leaving in an hour. I came to say goodbye.”

Poor Salina felt his heart tighten. “A duel?” “A big duel, uncle. A duel with Francis-by-the-Grace-of-God. . . . I’m off into the hills at Ficuzza; don’t tell a soul, specially Paolo. Great things are in the offing and I don’t want to stay at home. Anyway I’d be arrested at once if I did.”

The Prince had one of his visions: a savage guerrilla skirmish, shots in the woods, and Tancredi, his Tancredi, lying on the ground with his guts hanging out like that poor soldier. “You’re mad, my boy, to go with those people! They’re all *mafia* men, all crooks. A Falconeri should be with us, for the king.”

The eyes began smiling again. “For the King, yes, of course. But which King?” The lad had one of those sudden serious moods which made him so mysterious and so endearing. “Unless we ourselves take a hand now, they’ll foist a republic on us. If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change. D’you understand?” Rather moved, he embraced his uncle. “Well, good-bye, for now. I’ll be back with the tricolour.” The rhetoric of those friends of his had touched Tancredi a little too; and yet, no, there was a tone in that nasal voice which undercut the emphasis.

What a boy! Talking rubbish and contradicting it at the same time. And all that Paolo of his had on his mind probably at that moment was Guiscard’s digestion! This was his real son! The

Prince jumped up, pulled the towel from his neck and rummaged in a drawer. "Tancredi, Tancredi, wait!" He ran after his nephew, slipped a roll of gold pieces into his pocket, and squeezed his shoulder.

The other laughed. "You're subsidising the Revolution now! Thank you, Nuncle, see you soon; and my respects to my aunt." And off he rushed down the stairs.

Bendicò was called from following his friend with joyous barks through the Villa, the Prince's shave was over, his face washed. The valet came to help him into shoes and clothes. "The tricolour! Tricolour indeed! They fill their mouths with these words, the scamps. What's it got, that geometric emblem, that aping of the French, compared to our white banner with its golden lily in the centre? What hope can those clashing colours bring 'em?" It was now the moment for the monumental black satin cravat to be wound round his neck: a difficult operation during which political worries were best suspended. One turn, two turns, three turns. The big delicate hands smoothed out the folds, settled the overlaps, pinned into the silk the little head of Medusa with ruby eyes. "A clean waistcoat. Can't you see this one's dirty?" The valet stood up on tiptoe to help him into a frock-coat of brown cloth; he proffered a handkerchief with three drops of bergamot. Keys, watch and chain, money, the Prince put in a pocket himself. Then he glanced in a mirror; no doubt about it, he was still a fine-looking man. "Old play-boy indeed! A bad joke, that one of Tancredi's! I'd like to see him at my age, all skin and bone as he is!"

His vigorous steps made the windows tinkle in the rooms he crossed. The house was calm, luminous, ornate; above all it was his own. On his way downstairs he suddenly understood that remark of Tancredi "if we want things to stay as they are . . ." Tancredi would go a long way: he'd always thought so.

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The estate office was still empty, lit silently by the sun through closed shutters. Although the scene of more frivolity than anywhere else in the villa, its appearance was of calm

austerity. On white-washed walls, reflected in wax-polished tiles, hung enormous pictures representing the various Salina estates; there, in bright colours contrasting with the gold and black frame, was Salina, the island of the twin mountains, surrounded by a sea of white-flecked waves on which pranced beflagged galleons; Querceta, its low houses grouped round the rustic church on which were converging groups of bluish-coloured pilgrims; Ragattisi tucked under mountain gorges: Argivocale, tiny in contrast to the vast plains of corn dotted with hard-working peasants; Donnafugata with its baroque palace, goal of coaches in scarlet and green and gilt, loaded with women, wine and violins; and many others, all protected by a taut reassuring sky and by the Leopard grinning between long whiskers. Each picture was jocund—each illustrating the enlightened rule, direct or delegated, of the House of Salina. Ingenuous masterpieces of rustic art from the previous century; useless though at showing boundaries, or detailing tenures or tenancies; such matters remained obscure. The wealth of centuries had been transmuted into ornament, luxury, pleasure; no more; the abolition of feudal rights had swept away duties with privileges; wealth, like old wine, had let the dregs of greed, even of care and prudence, fall to the bottom of the barrel, preserving only verve and colour. And thus eventually it cancelled itself out; this wealth which had achieved its own object was now composed only of essential oils—and like essential oils soon evaporated. Already some of the estates which looked so gay in those pictures had taken wing, leaving behind only bright-coloured paintings and names. Others seemed like those September swallows which though still present are already grouped stridently on trees, ready for departure. But there were so many; endless, they seemed.

In spite of this the sensation felt by the Prince on entering his own office was, as always, an unpleasant one. In the centre of the room towered a huge desk, with dozens of drawers, niches, sockets, hollows and folding shelves; its mass of yellow wood

and black inlay was carved and decorated like a stage set, full of unexpected, uneven surfaces, of secret drawers which no one knew now how to work except thieves. It was covered with papers and, although the Prince had taken care that most of these referred to the starry regions of astronomy, there were quite enough of others to fill his princely heart with dismay. Suddenly he was reminded of King Ferdinand's desk at Caserta, also covered with papers needing decisions by which the King illuded himself to be influencing the course of fate, actually flowing on its own in another valley.

Salina thought of a medicine recently discovered in the United States of America which could prevent suffering even during the most serious operations and produce serenity amid disaster. Morphia was the name given to this crude substitute for the stoicism of the ancients and for Christian fortitude. With the late King, poor man, phantom administration had taken the place of morphia; he, Salina, had a more refined recipe: astronomy. And thrusting away the memory of lost Ragattisi and precarious Argivocale, he plunged into reading the latest number of the *Journal des Savants*. "*Les dernières observations de l'Observatoire de Greenwich présentent un intérêt tout particulier . . .*"

But he was soon exiled from these stellar realms. In came Don Ciccio Ferrara, the accountant. He was a scraggy little man who hid the deluded and rapacious mind of a Liberal behind reassuring spectacles and immaculate cravats. That morning he looked brisker than usual; obviously the same news which had depressed Father Pirrone had acted as a tonic on him. "Sad times, Excellency," he said after the usual ritual greetings. "Big troubles ahead, but after a bit of bother and a shot or two things will turn out for the best: then glorious new days will dawn for this Sicily of ours; if it weren't that so many fine lads are sure to get killed, we should be really pleased."

The Prince grunted and expressed no opinion. "Don Ciccio," he said then, "the Querceta rents need looking into: we haven't had a thing from them for two years."

“The books are ready, Your Excellency.” It was the magic phrase. “I only have to write to Don Angela Maza to send out collectors: I will prepare the letter for your signature this very day.”

He went to turn over the huge registers. In them, with two years' delay, were inscribed in minute writing all the Salina accounts, except for the really important ones. When he was alone again the Prince waited a little before soaring back through the clouds. He felt irritated not so much by the events themselves as by the stupidity of Don Ciccio, whom he sensed at once to represent the class which would now be gaining power. “What the fellow says is the very contrary of the truth. Regretting the fine lads who're sure to die! there'll be very few of those, if I'm any judge of the two adversaries; not a single casualty more than is strictly necessary for a victory bulletin, whether compiled at Naples or Turin. But he does believe in 'glorious new days for this Sicily of ours' as he puts it; these have been promised us on every single one of the thousand invasions we've had, by Nicias onwards, and they've never come. And why should they come, anyway? What will happen next? Oh, well. Just negotiations punctuated by a little harmless shooting, then all will be the same though all will be changed.” Into his mind had come Tancredi's ambiguous words, which he now found himself really understanding. Reassured, he ceased turning over the pages of the scientific review and looked up at the scorched slopes of Monte Pellegrino, scarred like the face of misery by eternal ravines.

Soon afterwards appeared Russo, whom the Prince found the most significant of his dependants. Clever, dressed rather smartly in a striped velvet jacket, with greedy eyes below a remorseless forehead, the Prince found him a perfect specimen of a class on its way up. He was obsequious too, and even sincerely friendly in a way, for his cheating was done in the certainty of exercising a right. “I can imagine how Your Excellency must be worried by Signorino Tancredi's departure; but he won't be away long, I'm sure, and all will end well.” Again

the Prince found himself facing one of the enigmas of Sicily; in this secret island, where houses are barred and peasants refuse to admit they even know the way to their own village in clear view on a hillock within a few minutes' walk, here, in spite of the ostentatious show of mystery, reserve is a myth.

He signed to Russo to sit down and stared him in the eyes. "Pietro, let's talk to each other man to man. You're involved in all this too, aren't you?" No, came the answer, not actually; he had a family and such risks were for young men like Signorino Tancredi. "I'd never hide anything from Your Excellency, who's like a father to me." (Yet three months before he had hidden in his cellar three hundred baskets of lemons belonging to the Prince, and he knew that the Prince knew.) "But I must say that my heart is with them, those bold lads." He got up to let in Bencicò, who was making the door shake under his friendly impetus. Then he sat down again. "Your Excellency knows we can stand no more; searches, questions, nagging about every little thing, a police-spy at every corner of the street; an honest man can't even look after his own affairs. Afterwards, though, we'll have liberty, security, lighter taxes, ease, trade. Everything will be better; the only ones to lose will be the priests. But the Lord protects poor folk like me, not them."

The Prince smiled. He knew that he, Russo, was at that moment trying through intermediaries to buy the estate of Argivocale. "There will be a day or two of shooting and trouble, but Villa Salina will be safe as a rock; Your Excellency is our father, I have many friends here. The Piedmontese will come cap in hand to pay Your Excellencies their respects. And then you are also the uncle, the guardian of Don Tancredi!"

The Prince felt humiliated, reduced to the rank of one protected by Russo's friends; his only merit, as far as he could see, was being uncle to that urchin Tancredi. "In a week's time I'll find my life's only safe because I keep Bencicò. He squeezed one of the dog's ears so hard that the poor creature whined, honoured doubtless but in pain.

Shortly afterwards a remark of Russo's relieved the Prince.

“Everything will be better, believe me, Excellency. Honest and able men will have a chance to get ahead, that’s all. The rest will be as it was before.” All that these people, these petty local Liberals wanted, was to find ways of making more money themselves. No more. The swallows would take wing a little sooner, that was all. Anyway there were still plenty in the nest.

“You may be right. Who knows?” Now he had penetrated all the hidden meanings; the enigmatic words of Tancredi, the rhetorical ones of Ferrara, the false but revealing ones of Russo, had yielded their reassuring secret. Much would happen, but all would be play-acting; a noisy, romantic play with a few spots of blood on the comic costumes. This was a country of arrangements, with none of that frenzy of the French; and anyway, had anything really serious happened in France, except for June of ’48? He felt like saying to Russo, but his innate courtesy held him back, “I understand now; you don’t want to destroy us, who are your ‘fathers’. You just want to take our places. Gently, nicely, maybe even putting a few thousand ducats in our pockets. And what then? Your nephew, my dear Russo, will sincerely believe himself a baron; maybe you, because of your name, will become descendant of a grand duke of Muscovy instead of some red-skinned peasant, which is what that name of yours means. And long before that your daughter will have married one of us, perhaps Tancredi himself, with his blue eyes and his willowy hands. She’s good-looking, anyway, and once she’s learned to wash . . . For all will be the same, just as it is now: except for an imperceptible change round of classes. My Court Chamberlain’s gilt keys, my cherry-coloured cordon of St. Januarius will stay in a drawer and end up in some glass case of Paolo’s son. But the Salina will remain the Salina; they may even get some sort of compensation; a seat in the Sardinian Senate, that pistachio ribbon of St. Maurice. Both have tassels, after all.”

He got up. “Pietro, talk to your friends, will you? There are girls here. They mustn’t be alarmed.”

“I felt that, Excellency, and have already spoken of it—Villa

Salina will be quiet as a convent,” and he smiled with amiable irony.

Don Fabrizio went out followed by Bendicò; he wanted to go up and see Father Pirrone, but the dog's yearning look forced him out into the garden; for Bendicò had thrilling memories of the fine work he'd put in the night before, and wanted to finish it off like a good artist. The garden was even more odorous than the day before, and under the morning sun the gold of the acacia tree clashed less. “What about our King and Queen, though, what about them? And what about the principle of legitimacy?” The thought disturbed him a moment, he could not avoid it. For a second he felt like Málvica. Those Ferdinands, those Francisces that had been so despised, seemed for a moment like elder brothers, trusting, just, affectionate, true kings. But the defence forces of his inner calm always on the alert in the Prince were already hurrying to his aid, with the musketry of law, the artillery of history. “What about France? Isn't Napoleon III illegitimate? And aren't the French quite happy under that enlightened Emperor, who will surely lead them to the highest of destinies? Anyway, let's face it. Was our Charles III so definitely within his right? Was his Battle of Bitonto so unlike that of Bisacquino or Corleone or any of these battles in which the Piedmontese are now sweeping our troops before them? One of those battles fought so that all should remain as it was? And anyway, even Jupiter was not legitimate King of Olympus.

At this, of course, Jupiter's *coup d'état* against Saturn was bound to bring his mind back to the stars.

Leaving Bendicò panting from his own dynamism, he climbed the stairs again, crossed rooms in which his daughters sat chatting to friends from the Holy Redeemer (at his passage the silken skirts rustled as the girls rose), went up a long ladder and came into the bright blue light of the observatory. Father Pirrone, with the serene air of a priest who has said Mass and drunk black coffee with Monreale biscuits, was sitting immersed in algebraical formulae. The two telescopes and three lenses

were lying there quietly, dazed by the sun, with black pads over the eyepieces, like well-trained animals who knew their meal was only given them at night.

The sight of the Prince drew the priest from his calculations and reminded him of his humiliation of the night before. He got up, and then, as he bowed politely, found himself saying, "Is Your Excellency coming to confession?" The Prince, whose sleep that night and conversations that morning had driven the episode of the previous night from his mind, looked amazed. "Confession? It's not Saturday." Then he remembered and smiled, "Really, Father, there wouldn't even be need, would there? You know it all already."

This insistence on his enforced complicity irritated the Jesuit. "Excellency, the efficacy of confession not only consists in telling our sins, but in being sorry for them. And until you do so and show me you do so, you will remain in mortal sin, whether I know what your sins are or not." He blew a meticulous whiff at a bit of fluff on his sleeve and plunged back into his abstractions.

Such was the calm produced in the Prince's mind by the political discoveries of that morning that he smiled at what would at other times have seemed to him gross impertinence. He opened one of the windows of the little tower. The countryside spread below in all its beauty. Under the leaven of the strong sun everything seemed weightless; the sea in the background was a dash of pure colour, the mountains which had seemed so alarmingly full of hidden men during the night now looked like masses of vapour on the point of dissolving, and grim Palermo itself lay crouching quietly around its monasteries like a flock of sheep around their shepherds. Even the foreign warships anchored in the harbour in case of trouble spread no sense of fear in the majestic calm. The sun, still far from its blazing zenith on that morning of the 13th of May, was showing itself the true ruler of Sicily; the crude brash sun, the drugging sun, which annulled every will, kept all things in servile immobility, cradled in violence and arbitrary dreams.

“It’ll take any number of Victor Emmanuels to change this magic potion for ever being poured for us.”

Father Pirrone had got up, adjusted his sash and moved towards the Prince with a hand out. “Excellency, I was too brusque. Let me not trespass on your kindness, but do please listen and come to confession.”

The ice was broken. And the Prince could tell Father Pirrone of his own political intuitions. But the Jesuit was far from sharing his relief and even became acid again. “Briefly, then, you nobles will come to an agreement with the Liberals, and yes, even with the Masons, at our expense, at the expense of the Church. Then, of course, our property, which is the patrimony of the poor, will be seized and carved up among the most brazen of their leaders; and who will then feed all the destitute sustained and guided by the Church to-day?” The Prince was silent. “How will those desperate masses be placated? I’ll tell you at once, Excellency. They will be flung first a portion, then another portion and eventually all the rest of your estates. And so God will have done His justice, even by means of the Masons. Our Lord healed the blind in body; but what will be the fate of the blind in spirit?”

The unhappy priest was breathing hard; sincere horror at the foreseen dispersal of Church property was linked with regret at his having lost control of himself again, with fear of offending the Prince, whom he genuinely liked and whose blustering rages as well as disinterested kindness he knew well. So he sat down warily, glancing every now and again at Don Fabrizio, who had taken up a little brush and was cleaning the knobs of a telescope, apparently absorbed. A little later he got up and cleaned his hands thoroughly with a rag; his face was quite expressionless, his light eyes seemed intent only on finding any remaining stain of oil in the cuticles of his nails. Down below, around the villa, all was luminous and grandiose silence, emphasised rather than disturbed by the distant barking of Benticò baiting the gardener’s dog at the far end of the lemon-grove, and by the dull rhythmic beat from the kitchen of a cook’s knife chopping meat

for the approaching meal. The sun had absorbed the turbulence of men as well as the harshness of earth. The Prince moved towards the priest's table, sat down and began drawing pointed little Bourbon lilies with a carefully sharpened pencil which the Jesuit had left behind in his anger. He looked serious but so serene that Father Pirrone no longer felt on tenterhooks.

"We're not blind, my dear Father, we're just human beings. We live in a changing reality to which we try to adapt ourselves like seaweed bending under the pressure of water. Holy Church has been granted an explicit promise of immortality; we, as a social class, have not. Any palliative which may give us another hundred years of life is like eternity to us. We may worry about our children and perhaps our grandchildren; but beyond what we can hope to stroke with these hands of ours we have no obligations. I cannot worry myself about what will happen to any possible descendants in the year 1960. The Church, yes, She must worry for She is destined not to die. Solace is implicit in Her desperation. Don't you think that if now or in the future She could save herself by sacrificing us She wouldn't do so? Of course She would, and rightly."

Father Pirrone was so pleased at not having offended the Prince that he did not take offence either. Of course that word "desperation" applied to the Church was quite inadmissible, but long habit as confessor had made him capable of appreciating Don Fabrizio's disillusioned mood. He must not let the other triumph, though. "Now, Excellency, you have a couple of sins to confess to me on Saturday; one of the flesh yesterday, one of the spirit to-day. Remember!"

Both soothed, they began discussing a report which they would soon be sending to a foreign observatory, at Arcetri. Supported, guided, it seemed, by calculations which were invisible at that hour yet ever present, the stars cleft the ether in those exact trajectories of theirs. The comets would be appearing as usual, punctual to the fraction of a second, in sight of whoever was observing them. They were not messengers of catastrophe as Stella thought; on the contrary, their appearance

at the time foreseen was a triumph of the human mind's capacity to project itself and to participate in the sublime routine of the skies. "Let's leave the Bencidòs down there running after rustic prey, and the cooks' knives chopping the flesh of innocent beasts. From up in this observatory the bluster of the one and the blood on the other merge into tranquil harmony. The real problem is how to go on living this life of the spirit in its most sublimated moments, those moments that are most like death."

So reasoned the Prince, forgetting his own recurrent whims, his own cavortings of the night before. During those moments of abstraction he seemed more intimately absolved, in the sense of being linked anew with the universe, than by any blessing of Father Pirrone. For half an hour that morning the gods of the ceilings and the monkeys on the walls were again put to silence. But in the drawing-room no one noticed.

When the bell for luncheon called them downstairs, both had regained their serenity, due to understanding the political scene and to setting that understanding aside. An atmosphere of unusual relaxation had spread over the house. The midday meal was the chief one of the day, and went, God be thanked, quite smoothly. This in spite of one of the ringlets framing the face of the twenty-year-old Carolina, the eldest daughter, dropping into her soup plate because apparently of an ill-secured pin. Another day the incident might have had dreadful consequences, but now it only heightened the gaiety; and when her brother, sitting next to her, took the lock of hair and pinned it on his neckerchief where it hung like a scapular, even the Prince allowed himself a smile. Tancredi's departure, destination and reasons were now known to all, and everyone talked of them, except Paolo who went on eating in silence. No one was really worrying about him, in fact, but the Prince, who showed no signs of the anxiety he still felt deep down, and Concetta who was the only one with a shadow on her pretty forehead. "The girl must have her eye on the young scamp. They'd make a fine couple. But I fear Tancredi will have to aim higher, by which of

course I mean lower.”

To-day, as political calm had cleared the mists generally veiling it, the Prince's fundamental good nature showed on the surface. To reassure his daughter he began explaining what useless muskets the royal army had; the barrels of those enormous pieces had no rifling, he said, so bullets coming from them would have very little penetration; technical comments thought up on the spur of the moment, understood by few and convincing none but consoling all, including Concetta, as they managed to transform war into a neat little diagram of fire-trajectories from the very squalid chaos that it really was.

At the end of the meal appeared a rum jelly. This was the Prince's favourite pudding, and the Princess had been careful to order it early that morning in gratitude for favours granted.

It was rather threatening at first sight, shaped like a tower with bastions and battlements and smooth slippery walls impossible to scale, garrisoned by red and green cherries and pistachio nuts; but into its transparent and quivering flanks a spoon plunged with astounding ease. By the time the amber-coloured fortress reached Francesco Paolo, the sixteen-year-old son who was served last, it consisted only of shattered walls and hunks of wobbly rubble. Exhilarated by the aroma of rum and the delicate flavour of the multi-coloured garrison, the Prince enjoyed watching the rapid demolishing of the fortress beneath the assault of his family's appetite. One of his glasses was still half-full of Marsala. He raised it, glanced round the family, gazed for a second into Concetta's blue eyes, then said: "To the health of our Tancredi." He drained his wine in a single gulp. The initials F.D., which before had stood out clearly on the golden colour of the full glass, were no longer visible.

In the estate office, to which he returned after luncheon, the sunlight was oblique, and the pictures of his estates, now shadowed, sent no messages of reproof. "Blessings on Your Excellency," muttered Pastorello and Lo Nigro, the two tenants of Ragattisi who had brought the portion of their rent they paid

in kind. They were standing very straight with stunned-looking eyes in faces carefully shaven and burnt dark by sun. They gave out a smell of flocks and herds. The Prince talked to them cordially in his very stylised dialect, inquired about their families, the state of their livestock, the outlook for the crops. Then he asked, "Have you brought anything?" And when the two answered yes, that it was in the room next door, the Prince felt a twinge of shame as he realised that the interview was a repetition of his own audiences with King Ferdinand. "Wait five minutes and Ferrara will give you the receipts." He put into their hands a couple of ducats each, worth more, probably, than what they had brought. "Drink my health, will you?" and then went and looked at their produce: on the ground were four *caciocavallo* cheeses, each weighing roughly ten kilos; he gave them a careless glance; he loathed that particular cheese; there were six baby lambs, the last of the year's litter, with their heads lolling pathetically above the big gash through which their life-blood had flowed a few hours before. Their bellies had been slashed open too, and iridescent intestines hung out. "May God receive his soul," he thought, remembering the gutted soldier of a month before. Four pairs of chickens tied by the claws were twisting in terror under Bendicò's restless snout. "Another example of pointless alarm," he thought, "the dog is no danger to them at all; he wouldn't even touch one of their bones as it would give him a belly-ache."

All this blood and panic revolted him, however. "Pastorello, take the chickens into the coop, will you, as there's no need of them in the larder; and another time take the baby lambs straight into the kitchen, will you; they make a mess here. And you, Lo Nigro, go and tell Salvatore to come and clean up and take away the cheeses. And open the window to let out the smell."

Then Ferrara came and made out the receipts.

When the Prince went upstairs again, he found Paolo, his heir, the Duke of Querceta, waiting for him in his study on the red sofa where he proposed to take his siesta. The youth had screwed up all his courage to talk to him. Short, slim, olive-

skinned, he seemed older than the Prince himself. "I wanted to ask you, papa, how we're to behave with Tancredi when we next meet him."

The Prince understood at once and felt a twinge of annoyance. "What d'you mean? Has anything changed?"

"But papa, you can't possibly approve; he's gone to join those swine who're making trouble all over Sicily; things like that just aren't done."

Personal jealousy, a bigot's resentment of his agnostic cousin, a dullard's at the other's zest, had taken political guise. The Prince was so indignant that he did not even ask his son to sit down. "Better to make a fool of oneself than spend all day staring at horses' dung! I'm even fonder of Tancredi than I was before. And anyway what he's doing isn't as silly as all that. If in the future you're able to go on putting Duke of Querceta on your cards, and if you inherit any money when I'm gone, you will owe it to Tancredi and to others like him. Out with you now, and don't mention the subject to me again! I'm the only one who gives orders here." Then he became kindlier and substituted irony for anger. "Be off now, son, as I want to have a snooze. Go and talk politics with Guiscard, you'll understand each other."

And as a shaken Paolo closed the door behind him, the Prince took off his frock-coat and boots, made the sofa creak under his weight and slid calmly off to sleep.

When he awoke, his valet came in with a newspaper and a letter on a tray. They had been sent up from Palermo by his brother-in-law Málvica, brought by a mounted groom a short while before. Still a little dazed from his afternoon nap, the Prince opened the letter. "My dear Fabrizio, I am writing to you in a state of utter collapse. Such dreadful news in the paper. The Piedmontese have landed. We are all lost. To-night I and my whole family will take refuge on a British man-o'-war. You will want to do the same, I am sure; if you wish I can reserve a berth or two for you. May God save our beloved King! As always, Ciccio."

He folded up the letter, put it in his pocket and began laughing out loud. That ass Málvica! He'd always been a rabbit. Not understanding a thing, and now panic-struck. Abandoning his palace to the mercy of servants; this time he'd really find it empty on his return. "That reminds me, Paolo must go and stay down at Palermo; a house empty at a moment like this means a house lost. I'll tell him at dinner."

He opened the newspaper. "On the 11th of May an act of flagrant piracy culminated in the landing of armed men at Marsala. The latest reports say that the band numbers about eight hundred, and is commanded by Garibaldi. When these brigands set foot on land they were very careful to avoid any encounter with the royal troops, and moved off, as far as can be ascertained, in the direction of Castelvetro, threatening peaceful citizens and spreading rapine and devastation, etc., etc. . . ."

The name of Garibaldi disturbed him a little. That adventurer all hair and beard was a pure Mazzinian. He had caused a lot of trouble already. "But if that *Galantuomo* King of his has let him come down here it means they're sure of him. They'll curb him!"

Reassured, he combed his hair and had his shoes and frock-coat put on again. He thrust the newspaper into a drawer. It was almost time for Rosary, but the drawing-room was still empty. He sat down on a sofa, and as he waited noticed how the Vulcan on the ceiling was rather like the lithographs of Garibaldi he had seen in Turin. He smiled. "Cuckold!"

The family was gathering. Silken skirts rustled. The youngest were still joking together. Behind the door could be heard the usual echo of controversy between servants and Bencicò determined to take part.

A ray of sunshine full of dust specks lit up the malicious monkeys.

He knelt down. "*Salve Regina, Mater misericordiae.*"