

An excerpt from THE SECRET PRICE OF HISTORY by Gayle Ridinger and Paolo Pochettino

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We can't quite believe that others may covet some small thing we own. We might realize they are envious of our lifestyle, our spouse, bank account, good looks, career, well-brought-up kids, pleasant personality, resourcefulness, solid faith in something bigger...but envious to the point of obsession with some little object we possess? With such determination to have it that they might try to kill us?

Well, jewelry is small, you object. You are thinking of gold or diamonds. Let's forget diamonds: many of us have never had so much as a diamond engagement ring or we've divorced and sold it. And gold? But how many old wedding bands or christening bracelets are sitting undisturbed at the bottom of countless jewelry boxes without a shot being fired?

No, there is something strange going on. Something twenty-one-year-old Angie Cebrelli isn't aware of as she crosses the sunny field to the grandstand filled with people waiting to watch the Gettysburg Civil War battle re-enactment. When she asks one of the men wearing a baseball cap if the place next to him is taken, he moves his big butt a few more inches towards his child. She sees his eyes go to her breasts under her tank top—the same thing happened with some jerk at lunch. When the man obligingly swings his little boy up on his lap to make still more room for her, Angie feels a small foot kick her kneecap. A pudgy hand reaches towards her neck piece. “No, honey,” she mouths at the toddler with a smile.

She's in an excellent mood. It all started two months ago, when suddenly a way presented itself which allowed her to stop flitting around at college, changing majors and being a financial strain on her mother. Her mother's friend Stan offered her a bit of temp work at his rural Virginian TV station—one of those down-home-folksy channels that auctions off dish sets, watches, and rugs day and night—and instead of thinking it would be embarrassing to work there, as she might have once, she had with miraculous wisdom said yes. She wasn't ever going to have a Ivy League-style career—and none of the encouraging words from her mother, nor from her father before his fatal accident eight years ago, were going to change the fact she lacked the drive and focus for it. In short, she had nothing ahead of her in the current economic crisis but a looming Future, and whatever tunnel might penetrate its dark surface was the one to take. Who was she to say, *'No, that's stupid, that's sexist, being the Channel 19 weather girl is not what I want out of life'*? Who was she to demand more?

For the first week (while the regular weather girl recovered from her bladder operation), Angie stuck to her sunshine-and-rain script. A weather girl is a weather

girl. On the following Monday, however, the idea came to her out of nowhere that she could read the weather as a famous person from the past whose birthday it was that day. She showed up for the 6 pm broadcast dressed up like Joan of Arc. Stan got a kick out of that, and so on Wednesday she came as Fred Astaire. While Stan seemed happy enough again, she wasn't completely pleased. It felt like playing at dress-up. Could she connect with her viewers more? Could she find a BIG IDEA (or whatever that term was that she'd studied in her sociology-of-mass-media course) that would make Stan want to keep her on at the station even when the regular girl returned?

Last Friday, with her mother's help, the BIG IDEA came to her.

Showers tomorrow, folks. A far cry from the hot sunny weather on this day back in 1863. Does that date, July 3rd, tell you anything about who am I tonight? Does this red jacket from an old family suitcase give you any clue? If you guessed I'm a Civil War soldier, even though I'm dressed in red, you're right. I'm my great-great-great-grandfather, a member of the Italian regiment called the Garibaldi Guards, who fought at Gettysburg. And I got to wondering—how many of you folks at home also had ancestors who fought in the Civil War, or even a more recent conflict, and wonder what it was like? Write to our website and tell us a battle they were in, and I'll help you out in that regard. I'll send back word on the weather that day.

Someone uploaded that weather report on YouTube. Over the weekend people started to watch it. Hundreds at first, and then over a thousand. Every so often, her mom and she checked their numbers on the computer.

At the start of the following week, Stan told her that the Washington Post would be printing the blog photo of her dressed as Nonno Goffredo; this instant fame was so exciting that she shrieked briefly over the phone. Also, it seemed that two hundred people had already written to Channel 19 with details of their relatives, not only from the Civil War and the two World Wars, but also from Vietnam.

Thank you all. As I said on the air, I'll get back to you soon. In the meantime, consider how much you can come to understand of your ancestor's life if you go to a battle re-enactment. And of course I hope you'll follow me on this blog as I attend the important one going on in Gettysburg.

The trip to the Gettysburg re-enactment was Stan's idea. Of course Angie said yes; it was another yard or so of tunnel dug into her mountain. She had never felt her life humming along like this. Everything had always seemed either tentative or a struggle, and when her father died it had felt worse than even either of those. Maybe bad things had to happen before good things could?

"I want new photos for the blog," Stan told her. "I know it's going to be 100 degrees in the shade in Gettysburg—don't worry about the red shirt, but what else can you put on?"

Her mother set out on the kitchen table Nonno Goffredo's reading glasses and a bullet-fused-into-a-penny. "I got spanked for playing with these as a child," she revealed. "Well, want to wear his glasses with his soldier's cap?"

The cap was all right but Angie didn't like the idea of appearing on TV with glasses. "Isn't there anything else?"

Her mother scrounged further. "There're these tweezers with a little Italian flag stuck on them, and a vial of dried dark stuff."

They made faces at each other. "Do you think that's blood in there, Mom?"

"Could be." A librarian and history buff, her mother gave a sort of speculative chuckle at such things.

Then she set the gold medallion on top of the pile. It was the size of a small peach or a largish swimming metal, and it had a lion-man creature and a radiating sun symbol engraved on it.

"Hey," Angie said, taking it in.

"Stan is going to like this."

She was right.

It was a three-and-a-half hour drive to Gettysburg and Angie arrived at lunch time. Her college-wetted sense of aesthetics guided her into the parking lot of the Gettysburg Inn, a nicely restored early 19th century mansion, just off the main square, with a lawn sign advertising sandwiches and salads at special prices. Eager to get to the re-enactment site, she ordered just a tuna salad, which came quickly. Paying her bill took forever, however, on account of the strangely unhappy conversation—cryptic and full of long pauses—that the plump lady at the cash desk was having with a man in a blue Union officer's uniform. The fellow had a creepy-looking black goatee which covered his chin like moss, and he kept making sideway glances at Angie's chest. She was glad to be out of there.

At the grandstand, it is as roiling hot as on the 'battlefield.' Anyone over the age of seven is training binoculars or cameras at the two Union and Confederate 'armies' on the field. Angie raises her camera and takes the selfie that Stan wants. She thinks about how her mom back in Virginia would have liked to come but couldn't get the day off. At this moment her mother is sitting at the library circulation desk in the cool silence of other people's reading time. At the thought of this coolness, Angie raises the hot medallion from her sticky chest and tries fanning herself with it as she reads the Park Service brochure over the shoulder of the woman in front of her. *'Pickett's Charge. The infantry attack across open fields—12,000 against 6,000—ordered by Confederate General Robert E. Lee against General George G. Meade's Union positions on Cemetery Ridge on July 3, 1863, the last day of the Battle of Gettysburg. Fifty percent of the Southerners were to die in all futility.'*

The show of futility is very well staged. It starts with the re-enacting Confederate artillery corps belching and thundering for ten minutes in the middle of the field, then lines of figures raise their rifles, and there are cracking sounds as

some of the figures rush forward into the cloud of smoke and some others fall to their knees. She isn't expecting the tingle that suddenly comes over her—that empathy for both the killed and the killers. *If you feel in your gut the same fear that was in the gut of those of another generation, all this gets transformed into something more than play-acting.* She wants to wrap her mind around that further—it's blog material—but now she has more photos to take.

She trains the camera on the Confederate color-bearer in a run, leading the others in their whoop-howl-cry. She expects a second one of those famous rebel yells but never hears it; as she's changing the zoom, unaware of any coveting envy in the air, she receives a heavy hot punch in her right upper arm that makes her drop the camera and recoil backwards against a wall of feet and legs. In a silent daze of sunlight and throbbing, she stretches her left hand towards the hole of heat—unable to reach it.

Then she falls into a lap of darkness.

Rome, Italy - May 15, 1845

Another magnificent afternoon, a sweeping view of blue sky, domes, noble palaces, and terracotta roofs, all the sunlight one could ask for, but American painter James Freeman was not satisfied with the way the sitting was going in his studio. During the morning session, Maria—a new pick of his at the Spanish Steps this morning, a thin girl with black eyes that danced more than those of the others and a recent arrival from Articoli Corrado, the village of models, whom he'd settled for as the more famous ones were engaged—had done fine enough; but now after lunch Freeman was beginning to regret his shift away from scenes of boy street urchins and beggars, the canvases of which leaned against one wall in this work room and lined the length of the Persian rug in the adjoining parlour.

Maria was fidgeting, not keeping her basket of fruit still on her head nor her floral kerchief in place over her shoulders. He was rather surprised by this childish behavior. Experience told him that she had to be at least sixteen; he knew how to interpret the fact she had arrived this morning without any mother-chaperon.

“Hold still!” Freeman was good-natured in his complaint.

Maria's chin and shoulders settled obediently in place. Her eyes, however, skirted over Rome in the row of windows.

Something must be going on, he thought. He put down his paintbrush.

“Tell me, Maria. What's happening?”

“An execution.”

“Who is it?”

“A boy from a poor family. He's very handsome, they say. But he won't make his confession. No bells this morning--didn't you notice, maestro? Now they have

to wait till the *Ave Maria* at sunset.” She shrugged. “They’ll kill him then even if he hasn’t confessed.”

“Why?”

“Ho ho, *Madonna*, Maestro, the boy has a sweetheart. A rich noble girl, Maestro. But one day a big important priest saw her and, *Jesu*, he wanted her. And you know what, Maestro? She refused him.”

“Of course.”

“Of course,” Maria mimicked him under her breath, then giving in to her impatient nature; she took the fruit basket off her head, set it on the floor, and plopped down next to it.

So we’re taking a break, he thought. He went over to sit on the small settee he kept in the studio for his visitors.

“What do you know about Rome?” Maria chided. “As far as I can see, you only paint pictures of poor people. We’re talking about the rich. The boy shot a priest. And this priest is very important and influential. Some people say he’s the Pope’s nephew.”

“Did he kill him?”

She dismissed his question with a wave of her hand. “Who knows? He stole a pistol and fired it. Whether the priest dies or not, you get put to death for that. Then the magistrate found out that the boy was part of the Republican movement, and that meant the boy would get drawn and quartered as well.”

“Such barbarism.” Freeman shook his head. “Didn’t somebody, perhaps the girl’s family, try to intervene?”

Maria made incredulous eyes at him. In her world there were no such appeals for clemency. At most there were appeals for cleanliness. For the umpteenth time Freeman’s gaze fell on her dirty fingernails. Then he considered her head without the fruit basket; *how thin and mangy her black hair is*, he thought. *And that bony breastplate*. He’d chosen her for her eyes, of course. Her eyes and her erect back. The noble features that compensated for the rest. All his models had them.

He let her talk. He learned that the rich girl’s important family considered her a hot head.

“She’s known to say the same things they say up north,” Maria confided with relish. “They say that we need to be free and that the Pope should just think about religion. Anyway, Maestro, after she’d refused this priest; he waited for her in a dark place and had his way with her anyway. Of course, she didn’t say anything to her family” –here Maria rolled her eyes—“but then she got scared that she might be pregnant and she told the family doctor, who told her mother’s confessor, who told her mother.”

“What did the family do?”

“They caned her for being a hussy who shamelessly goes out alone after dark.”

“Ah,” he said, moved.

“Only then the boy shot the priest and they figured out where and why the girl was going out at night alone...and so now her family is forcing her to watch his execution from their palazzo. It’s near the turtle fountain and the *Teatro di Marcello*. The Pope in person granted permission for the scaffold to be set up there and not on the Bridge of St. Angelo. Then, they say, she’ll get packed off to a convent.”

“The boy was the only one condemned to death?”

“And who else were they going to condemn?”

Freeman let Maria go an hour early. It was pointless to go on; both of them heard the voices in the street and square below talking of the drama at hand. She promised to be back promptly at eight the next morning, then left him with one last titbit—the news that the feared and infamous hangman Mastro Titta would be the one to snuff out the boy’s life.

Freeman stood for a long moment at the center of what a painter friend called his ‘sky parlour’. At first he wondered about Mastro Titta—how this hangman looked physically and whether there was some sign of awareness in him of being a licensed murderer that a painter like himself might discern. After that, he began to wonder whether Augusta, his fiancée, might be making her way here and what importance this possibility should have in the face of the opportunity he had to record this raw atrocity in his sketch book. It was mid May, which meant the sun would be in another couple of hours; and if he left now he would be able to get over to the neighbourhood indicated by Maria in time to be a—a witness.

A witness to what?

To tragedy or more than tragedy? He felt sorry for the Italians, stifled in their democratic aims—that were so close, he thought, to those of America—by the great powers of Europe and by the Papacy.

Since his move to Rome (from where he made his occasional trip to Ancona, where he was U.S. Consul), he had sold numerous paintings in both expatriate and Italian circles and acquired an interest in political affairs, especially in the budding movements for civil rights and national unity. On sporadic occasions, he had seen that the proverbial Italian fatalism was giving way here and there to seething indignation. To his American mind, this could provide the seeds for self-determination and national unity.

There would be indignation at the boy’s bloody execution—but how much? Did he have the stomach for it?

Outside, he followed the stream of people headed in the direction of the *Teatro di Marcello*. Shouting urchins ran to burly men of the lowest classes—the lot of them dressed in blue cloaks, russet cloaks, or uncloaked rags—who were presumably their fathers. Freeman walked in their midst with his sketch pad under one arm. The moving crowd grew in number as they crossed the intersections with the impassable back streets of rotten or rickety houses, many built into or on ruins of solid Roman walls, which did not seem inhabited and certainly had never been

built to any plan. At their end, or sometimes in their middle, there was a dump heap of vegetable refuse and pile of broken crockery.

Freeman's flow of people converged with several other jubilant throngs into a central grassy meadow spotted with stone rubble—a sort of overgrown cemetery of civilization. He had met at a dinner the two English aristocrats who were financing the last of a long line of excavations of the mysterious ground, which, amidst popular indifference, had revealed chunky pedestals and curved rocks to be imperial columns and triumph arches. Bells tolled on the far side of the meadow, where the first mounted parties of the Pope's dragoons appeared. The reaction of the crowd indicated to him that the soldiers were directed towards the execution site. The people around him were accelerating, he noticed, but he refused to do so. When the crowd followed the dragoons past a Baroque church with a sign on its closed door, he was the only one who stopped to read the appeal to the population to pray for the handsome boy's soul.

Finally, in the square with the fountain out of which climbed four bronze turtles, teasingly held in check on the rim by four boy sprites, Freeman located a knot of his peers: foreign-looking individuals in bourgeois dress, the men in tall hats and the women in dark bonnets. A surge of elbows and torsos propelled him over to them. He thought he recognized a white-haired, bearded Englishman, and then he was sure: *there's Dickens*. He'd met the famous writer just two days ago at a reception at the British Embassy.

"Mr. Freeman! I wish I could say it is a pleasure to see you but the circumstances make it otherwise." Charles Dickens made a nod at his sketch pad and added, "Planning to record it?"

"To make some...visual notes. Maybe. We'll see."

"It's a sickening spectacle—you'll soon desist. Look at the huge crowd. They make it as gory and horrible as possible so that it'll stick in people's minds and they won't ever be able to forget it. All these children will remember it their entire lives."

"I imagine so," Freeman reflected.

"Their fathers, I am told, will give them a slap or punch at the moment that the blade drops." Dickens eyed him closely for a moment, as if assessing his sensibilities not as an artist but as a man. "By the way, there's also a drawing-and-quartering on the bill today. It's an act of mercy that they are not going to proceed to burn the body. The rest is apparently deemed a lesson enough. They say the poor devil tried to kill a papal prelate."

"So I've heard."

"And here he comes now, Mr. Freeman, look to your left at the heftiest man in your field of vision. That's Mastro Titta, the executioner, crossing the square on that wagon. We'd best follow along—the guillotine is set up two blocks from here. Titta's an umbrella-maker, you know. Apparently, he usually offers the condemned man a sniff of tobacco beforehand. My man-servant tells me that Titta

lives over near St. Peter's. He's under the protection of the Papal guards there. He only crosses the Tiber when there's an execution on. Too dangerous for him here otherwise."

"Pope Gregory XVI is definitely keeping him busy at the moment," Freeman muttered darkly. Dickens' air of informed, scientific interest made his own stance seem timid and nebulous, and though he walked with Dickens and his party to where the guillotine scaffold had been set up, he quickly lost sight of the illustrious English author in the mass of people. Whether this was by accident or not did not change his sense of relief.

Dominating the small square was a magnificent three-storied white palazzo. A lovely girl, with a twisted crown of honey-colored hair, was positioned on the long balcony over the central entrance. Even from a distance she looked terribly unhappy.

It was her. The girl.

The gloved hands of a tall, long-faced man, no doubt her father, gripped her shoulders from behind.

Freeman was horrified. She could do nothing but wait to watch her lover die.

The Papal Guards—there looked to be fifty or so of them—stood at ease in clusters, while their officers walked up and two in twos and threes, chatting together and smoking cigars. A pastry-seller sold his wares to customers, mostly women. Priests and monks elbowed a passage for themselves among the people and stood on tiptoe for a sight of the guillotine knife, then went away. Two artistic types of eccentric inclination (whom fortunately Freeman didn't know) mulled around in odd hats reminiscent of the Middle Ages. Over an hour went by.

The wait played a small trick on him: for a moment, half aware that he was deforming reality for a higher purpose—the way he did when he composed his 'fancy pictures'—Freeman made a mental sketch of the scene. It was the first and last he would feel like making.

To the sound of trumpets, the foot-soldiers marched up to the scaffold and formed a circle. The guillotine became the centre of a thicket of bayonets and sabres. The people pushed nearer, making way for the cart with the condemned boy. Flanking the cart were the slew of men and boys that had accompanied it from the prison, followed by three impassive monks, the last of whom hoisted an effigy of Christ on the cross canopied in black.

When the monks had positioned the cross at the foot of the scaffold, the boy reappeared on the platform. Freeman got a good look at him now. He was bare-footed, vigorously made and well-shaped, with dark hair and eyes. It was right to call him handsome. His hands were bound; a handkerchief was tied over his mouth, and the collar and neck of his shirt were cut away almost to the shoulder.

Titta appeared alongside of him, enormous in his black armless tunic. He pulled the gag off his mouth, and the youth began to shout and yank his arms. Freeman

could not make out his words. Pacifically, Titta offered him a bit of tobacco from the drawstring pouch hanging from his massive belt.

The boy spat at his executioner. Then he turned to the white palazzo and smiled up at his girl.

She was held by the arms of her father and two others, presumably kinsmen.

The boy kneeled down so promptly that it was heartbreaking. His neck was fitted into a hole in a cross plank. Below him was a leather bag. The silver blade sheet fell, and into it his head rolled instantly like a melon.

His sweetheart on her balcony shouted incomprehensible words. Despite the serpent coil of six arms she managed a half-rise, enough to launch her spit.

The executioner held up the boy's head by the hair.

After a minute, he paraded with it round the scaffold. The eyes were turned to one side. In the direction of the balcony, Freeman was sure. The face was already dull wax.

When the head had travelled round the four sides of the scaffold, Titta stuck it like an orange on a standing pole—to be stared at and for the flies to settle on. There was a rivulet of blood draining from the scaffolding. Two men were throwing water over the planks. Next Titta hoisted up the headless body and showed this to his public too.

There was no manifestation of disgust or pity in the people around Freeman. None of the indignation he expected either. They were quiet—that was all that could be said for them—and many had their mouths open. The boy's body was laid back on the platform so that Titta could take a club to it. His hacking made the body jerk and its limbs turn askew; for a moment it seemed that the boy might still be alive and resisting. A small puff of smoke emerged as Titta pulled the hot intestines from their cavity. They spilled over the edge of the platform as Titta wiped their grease off his hands on his apron in his sole gesture of annoyance. The bludgeoning continued. To Freeman, Titta's efforts began to resemble those of a woman beating a carpet. When the parts of the pounded body were finally separated, they also were put on display.

Freeman felt exactly how Dickens had said he would. His horror was paralyzing. He wondered where the writer was and what words he was finding for this moment. Next to him, a woman pointed out to her neighbour that the staring, shouting girl on the balcony was being pulled by her shoulders back through the French doors.

“Who is she? What's her name?” Freeman asked the woman abruptly.

He learned that girl's name was Eleonora Serlupi. Her family owned the white palazzo. They were nobles who'd been loyal to the Pope for centuries. Through a fog of numbness, he listened to the woman call Eleonora a disgrace to her family. He walked away as she was blaming the boy's crime on the changing times.

A few days later, while Freeman was finishing the painting, *Italian Beggar Girl*, which Maria had posed for, Augusta arrived without warning.

She often did that when she was in the phase of sketching but not yet sculpting a figure. She claimed that she couldn't stay put, that she had to be out and about and see as many faces as possible. One day she'd be interested in recording noses, the next day it would be chins. She'd stop in at her brother Eugenio's art studio, too. When she turned up at either place, she'd often be without her scarf, or gloves, or spare change—having given them away to some poor woman or bought medicine for a sick child.

"James?" she called, giving his door a short knock; then opening it with wifely, proprietary rights.

From over the top of his easel he smiled at her.

"Hello there."

"Hello, darling." She kissed the air between them.

Behind her stood a girl in a coarse peasant skirt, her face half-covered by a grimy hood, and her dirty feet in half-broken sandals.

"She asked me for help in the middle of the street, James. I couldn't just leave her there. At the very least, she needs a wash and something to eat."

"I know, Augusta, they all do. But—and I say this because we're speaking English and the girl can't understand—you really have to start being more careful about who you decide to help out. What if this girl has contacts with the young revolutionaries in town, the *carbonari*? What if she's being followed? Do you know how much trouble we could find ourselves in?"

While he was speaking, the girl had started circling the room and looking at the paintings. The careful attention she gave each canvas surprised him, as did the dainty step she took as she moved on to contemplate the next; he took a closer look at her as she lowered her hood, the vague impression forming in his mind that he'd seen her before.

"Come," said Augusta gently, crossing over to the girl.

It was Eleonora Serlupi. It just had to be. The same thick blondish red hair braided round her head.

Augusta announced that she was going to buy some cheese, and bread, and fruit. "Once we've fed her, I'll take her to my place for a bath. Isn't she pretty under all that dust, James? You could use her as a model," she suggested. "I'm sure you could pay her less than those girls from Abruzzo who collect on the Spanish Steps."

When Augusta had left, Freeman went back to his easel. He could feel the girl's eyes on him. Gesturing politely at his painting he told her in Italian, "The girl in it is named Maria. It was Maria who told me your story, Eleonora."

She was silent.

Wanting her to speak, he added, "I thought you were shut up in a convent somewhere."

“I nearly was,” she replied. “But some of Luigi’s friends...”

He noticed that her eyes had started to water and blink, and he amended that to: “Yes, of course, Luigi.”

“His friends assaulted the carriage that was taking me to the convent. It was easy. There were just some old family servants with me, and it was enough to threaten them with an old pistol.”

“Why aren’t you with these friends now? There are a lot of rebels and agitators in Rome. There must be a lot of good hideouts.”

“A coachman recognized one of the boys.”

“And now the Swiss Guards are looking for you.”

She nodded. “That’s why we split up. They had false papers and wanted to try to get to Milan. Word is that discontent is growing there too,” she added, sounding quite informed. “As for me, I’m hiding out here because I have a job I have to finish....even though it isn’t easy.”

“A job?”

“To kill that bastard.”

One didn’t expect to hear such words from a girl like her. She didn’t have an intense or burning look. On the contrary, her eyes were a soft brownish green and she had an open gaze, congruous with her young age. And yet, he intuited, there was something deep inside her that would not be commanded. The picture of her being retained by force on that balcony came into his mind, and he said, “I saw that you didn’t cry.”

“No, I didn’t cry.”

“I’m a foreigner,” he said suddenly. “I’d like to help you.”

Eleonora rewarded him with a smile of trust. “Where do you come from?” she asked.

“From the United States of America. A place very far away and not very important.”

“I know where it is. I’ve studied your country. I know that you threw out the English who’d invaded your land.”

“Well, yes, more or less,” Freeman replied, surprised at her knowledge. “But we are really very far from Europe,” he insisted. “We carry no weight here.” In a lighter voice he added, “And we don’t have a pope but a president...if we don’t like him, we change him.”

“We have a philosopher here who says we should have a president,” Eleonora replied gravely. “His name is Giuseppe Mazzini. He’s from the north... from Genoa. He says that Italy must become a united Republic and that even we women must be granted rights. He also says something strange—he says that we must all ‘progress.’ I don’t understand this.”

“The world’s changing,” Freeman explained. “People are starting to understand that they don’t owe anything to any emperor, king, or pope...that there must be established rights. For over fifty years in America we have had a Constitution.”

“What is that?”

“It’s a bit complicated to explain. In essence, it consists of laws that regulate a State. It says what a State can or can’t do.

“So in your country the Pope would have to obey laws—human laws, I mean, and not divine.”

“Exactly.”

As she was rubbing her eyes, he suggested that she take a rest on his sofa until Augusta returned with some cheese and bread. Without taking off her cape, Eleonora settled herself in a corner, leaned her head on a cushion in the crick between the sofa’s arm and back, sat up suddenly and without a second thought unpinned the braid of hair getting in the way of her comfort, and sank into the velvet softness with closed eyes.

He knew that there had to be twelve or fifteen years difference between them but he found her ever so lovely—the sort of beauty that abides with a man. He started to fantasticate on the moment when Luigi had first kissed her, and from that, on how they had met, on how such a girl and such a boy could fall in love, on the intoxicating effect of politics and revolutionary talk. He picked up a sketchpad and charcoal pencil from the lamp table and started to draw her head.

Her eyes fluttered open at the infinitely soft sound of the pencil.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Practising my profession. I’m the American Consul in Ancona and a painter in Rome.”

“Shouldn’t you be in Ancona?”

“Theoretically, that’s true. But you see, we consuls don’t receive a salary. We just get to keep a percentage on passport application fees and the like. I’d hoped that in Ancona, being a seaport, there’d be more passports to process and I’d have more paintings to sell. But it wasn’t like that. We didn’t see very many ships. And so I came to Rome.”

“Where there are more people to paint?”

“No, more people to sell paintings to. There’s a circle of English and American painters here and we all use the same models. The best don’t even have a name—we just call them the Sad Model, the Happy Model, and the like...” Freeman’s voice trailed off; he couldn’t quite think of a proper way in Italian to render the idea of the *fancy picture* genre he worked in, which aimed at moving viewers’ hearts towards the poor and dispossessed, with sentimentalism but with humour. In particular he was afraid she wouldn’t understand its political worth: the intention was not to be exploitive or disturbing but to alter viewers’ behaviour. Finally, embarrassed, he added, “You’re different. You have a fire inside you, whereas the models have only hunger.” In the space of a breath, he changed the subject: “There are quite a lot of Americans living in Rome. At least a hundred. And most of us are artists.”

Eleonora sat up. “Show me what you’re drawing.”

“Your head.” He flashed the sketch pad at her.

“Why?”

“Because it seems to me that someday your head will go with a story. I mean, with a scene or theme. I’ll keep it till then.”

She yawned broadly in answer.

“Let me finish it. Sit back and sleep,” he urged.

She did so with the natural immediacy characterizing her person. He returned to his sketch, deepening the lines of Eleonora’s Greek nose, making her hair curl more down her back. He had in mind putting her in a picture to rival his *Italian Beggars* that had caused a sensation at the Annual Exhibition at the National Academy of Design a few months before. Critics had rightly cited Titian as his ‘master’ in color and glazing and nature’s touch, and Murillo for his unglamorized depictions of common people. He struggled daily with ideas for how to make an allusion to classical myth and at the same time say something about the Italy that seemed to finally be in the making. He had no clear idea for now on what would be the subject of the painting with Eleonora, but he could sense that it would come to him. She was too delightfully authentic not to paint. He might decide not to put another figure in the scene with her, or at most an animal. As Giovanni Ferrero, their teacher at the drawing sessions he attended at the American Academy, kept saying: *non troppo confuso*—no complicated handling of the scene, and keep the backgrounds simplified. Character, pure character. Eleonora’s character was there in her features for him to get at. He was intent at rubbing and blurring the charcoal lines of her hairline, when suddenly a small pistol slipped out from under her cape and fell with a rattle on the floor.

He kept still, surprised and yet not surprised. It was the confirmation of what he thought about her: what she said was what she did. And yet she might do too much. When a few minutes had gone by and she remained asleep, he picked up the gun quietly and went with it to the bedroom, where he hid it at the back of the wardrobe.

It was only when he re-entered the room that she woke with a start. Her soft green-brown eyes fixed on him, the indomitable part of her temperament giving a pulse to them.

“I no longer have a family. I live for revenge, Mr. Freeman,” she said.

“Quite understandable. But we still need to consider where you can stay...where you are safe.” Then he added, “Of course, your friends are out of the question.”

“Then I will live in the street.”

“Your family and their emissaries are looking for you. You must be in some protected place.”

She refused to submit to any authority, as he’d imagined. But ‘authority’ presumably meant the Papal State, and so he tried a different tack; he told her

there was a religious community hostile to the Pope, and affiliated with the Anglicans, with an abbey a short distance from Rome where she could take refuge.

“All right,” she said after a moment.

“I feel much relieved. But do stay on till Augusta gets back so I can introduce you properly.”

“I’d prefer to go immediately.” She rewound her braid and raised her hood.

“But you must come back. I—and Augusta—would like to see you again. You are always welcome. I would like to finish my drawing next time. Or maybe begin a painting.”

Annoyance passed over her face.

To make amends, he asked, shaking her hand at the door, if there was anything she wanted.

Eleonora thought for a moment. “Yes, there is,” she replied. “I want.....a CONSTITUTION.”

Then she was gone.

Piedmont, Italy - March 26, 1849

The day dawned on the smells of Bassignana. It was a pungent foggy morning after several days of intense rain. The iron-damp odor of the flood land along the River Po pervaded the five or six streets of two-storey buildings, whose massive wooden doors stood open at this hour and whose muddy courtyards reeked of barn animals.

Goffredo Morelli was unloading wooden cheese molds from a cart in front of his shop. They were for *toma* rounds, which most people in town ate for dinner at good times and lamented the lack of when the times were bad. He was hurrying, mindful that it was time for his young cheeses to be removed from their forms and over-night liquid; then put back upside down.

But there was also something else in his cart this morning. There was a small pile of rennet in an open gunny sack, the smell of which always affected him in a peculiar way. This morning he would dry and clean the rennet—the stomachs of some young calves—and then slice it into small pieces and put it to soak in some whey and vinegar. Before going to bed tonight, he’d have to filter it; he needed it to curdle his cheese tomorrow. But for now its smell intruded on his thoughts. The smell of life and death. The smell of the slaughter of the young, which tomorrow would be replaced by the smell of young life—the smell of his cheeses! Once Teresa the wet nurse had told him that she smelled like one of his cheeses when she had two little ones of noblewomen attached to her breast.

Absorbed in his draining and turning, Goffredo heard a rumbling through the open shop door. He thought that it was strange that there was thunder and yet no

storm clouds. He left his curds and went out into the street, where Enrico, the blacksmith, was unfolding the wooden shutters of his shop.

“Is that thunder or cannons?”

“Cannons, cannons,” Enrico said in consternation. “Two young soldiers from our army came to wake me up last night. They had their officer’s horse, which needed reshoeing. There’s been a terrible battle at Novara between Piedmont and Austria. They said that King Carl Albert’s abdicated the throne. Our army’s been crushed, there are wounded and dead everywhere, Austrian prisoners nobody knows what to do with, and roaming bands of soldiers without food.”

“What was our King thinking?” Goffredo said. “Our army wasn’t ready for war. And then the stupid idea of launching an attack in all this rain, in the cold and mud.”

“I hear it was the Austrians who attacked, not us.” Enrico broke off to address the two farmers guiding their wagon out of the entranceway of the next building. “Hey! The Austrians have done us in. Carl Albert’s abdicated!”

There was no immediate reaction. The farmers, in dirty rough shirts and ropes instead of belts around their waists, impassively thumped at their horses’ rumps to make them stop. Only when the wagon stood still did they look at Enrico and Goffredo.

“The King did right to give up the throne,” said one shortly. “Can’t win against the Austrians.”

“And now this new king, Victor Emanuel II,” Goffredo muttered. “Only 28 years old.”

For the rest of the morning, between one cheese turning or salting and another, Goffredo restlessly mulled around the market in the small square surrounding the modest Baroque church that Bassignana called its cathedral; he was anxious to know something more from the townspeople—as agitated today as their hens and cocks on sale.

No one had much concrete news to offer but the amount of hear-say was outstanding. Finally, towards noon, a bearded town official with a rolled parchment under one arm arrived in the square, preceded by a boy hoisting the white and red silk banner of the House of Savoy.

“In the name of the Royal House of Savoy, I order all his Majesty’s subjects to adhere to the following rules. First, all travel in the direction of Casale Monferrato is forbidden until further notice! Second, no aid or refuge is to be given to deserters from the Royal Army of Piedmont and Sardinia!”

Goffredo, who sold his cheese to the official’s family, stepped forward as he was re-rolling his edict. “So it’s true—officially?”

The official nodded tersely. “The Austrians have broken through our defense line and have Casale under siege.”

“Looks like we’re God forsaken, doesn’t it?” Goffredo’s eyes darted around the square, taking in the everyday happenings of a small town in peace time.

“No one knows yet if an armistice’s been signed,” the official admitted.

“Which means we surrender.”

“Something like that.”

Someone inadvertently touched the back of his right elbow and Goffredo realized that other men were standing behind him listening.

“There are not just the Austrians to worry about. Listen!” The official, whose name was Valsesia, spoke loudly now, for the benefit of all. “Many of our retreating soldiers have sacked and plundered nearby towns—including Novara, the site of the battle. Those caught are being put up in front of a firing squad—immediate executions in the street.”

There was murmuring at this, but before it could grow, the official added, “What matters is that you do as you’re told. Nobody is to feed or offer a bed to a runaway soldier.”

“The Austrians are worse,” the school headmaster broke in. “And it stands to reason that a regiment or two will come through here.”

The man who’d touched Goffredo’s elbow said into his ear from behind, “And you, cheesemonger? Think the Austrians are going to sack Bassignana?”

Goffredo turned and looked into the other’s eyes, big and round and brown—peasant eyes in a round face, like his. He recognized him as kin to the barrel-maker.

“We have everything to lose if they do,” he said. “But the King mustn’t sign an armistice with Austria. We have to keep fighting, not give up because Novara’s lost. Otherwise we’ll never gain freedom.”

With that, he walked away. Back to the salting...

That night in the room above his shop, Goffredo made himself the sort of supper that took a long time to eat; he purposely wanted to sit in silence at his table and think. He dipped pieces of Jerusalem artichoke and celery into the *bagna cauda*, the pasty warm sauce of anchovies, garlic, and olive oil, and each piece (so it seemed to him) brought on a new thought. To accompany these reflections, and to buttress their importance, he opened a bottle of Barolo, the red wine that Count Cavour had recently started making, which he’d received as payment for his cheese. Its rich smell told him it was a big wine. Bravo, Cavour. It slipped down his throat, although he knew it was to be drunk slowly.

This excellent wine did its work excellently...

A Piedmontese proverb that his father had liked when he was alive came to mind. *Al prim colp l'erbo a casca nen. The first blow doesn't fell the tree.*

It’d been his father’s way of ending many a political discussion.

How he missed those heated talks. The echo of a sarcastic but nobly intended line or two made Goffredo smile to himself. He might be the illegitimate son of a

Turinese noblewoman who'd died in childbirth, but his father, a cheese maker and advocate of republican ideals, had managed to see that he, unlike most of his fellow villagers, had learned to read and write. This was accomplished in spite of constant money problems and his father's participation in numerous hopeless insurrections and consequent months in prison. A desperate life it had been, and soon finished—seven years ago already—from natural causes and not, cruel twist of fate, with the heroic death in battle that he'd so desired.

Goffredo still had a treatise or two on political revolution that had proudly belonged to Antonio Morelli—concealed so well under a shelf of cheese that no military search party had ever found them. The one he loved best was Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract, or Principles of Political Right*.

He raised his glass in tribute to Papà. "I know," he murmured—would his father hear him—"the first blow *doesn't* fell the tree....but at last we've made that first blow."

What a time to be alive. He poured himself some more ruby-red wine. There were so many events, hopes and disillusionments! After the death of Napoleon, the emperors, kings, and dukes of the great powers of Europe had sat round a banquet table—they with their wine, too—in Vienna during the winter of 1815 and set back the hands of history to 1789, setting up all the old hierarchies again, as if democracy or national unity or citizens' rights had never existed. Every so often there'd been a revolt of the kind his father'd been brave enough to support, and secret societies had been founded too, but for the most part the ideals of the French Revolution left behind by Napoleon's army lay dormant for more than thirty years. Only last year—last year!—had full-scale revolution come to a head. People in the major cities of Europe had risen up against the authoritarian regimes imposed on them. The year 1848, a great vintage as popular revolts go. And now it was gone.

"To the French Revolution." Goffredo raised his glass.

They had all hoped briefly in the King of Piedmont and Sardinia this year, with his vision of a united Italy under the Savoy flag. Italy for Italians! But when rich and mighty Milan over in nearby Lombardy had managed to overthrow Austrian rule after a five-day revolt by its citizens and Carl Albert of Savoy had launched an assault on the retreating Austrian army, he had suddenly lost his nerve and let them go.

Dear God, why hadn't it lasted?

When did one know if something was hopeless—what decided it? He felt the knife of his love for his father. Had he—and the men he'd bragged of with ardour and affection—made those sacrifices for nothing?

From the street came the sound of one and then another massive entrance door being pulled shut and bolted. Also, the swinging sound of the shutters on the next house. The people of Bassignana were bracing for the arrival of the Austrians. And what was going on in his own house? From the stairway connecting to the shop below, he heard footsteps taking the creaking floor plank just inside the rear

door to the courtyard. Then a cheese form slid on a shelf, wood scraping over wood.

The Austrians? But the footsteps indicated one sole intruder.

One of our deserters, he decided.

He seized the hay fork from its hook at the top of the stairwell. He'd make the traitor pay both for stealing his cheese and losing the battle. Charging down the steps, he found himself barrelling into a crouching figure. A young man's frightened face stared up at him. His cheeks were bulging with cheese. He was wearing the dirty white uniform of an Austrian Army officer.

Goffredo thrust the hay fork under the other's chin, against his chest. The Austrian chewed faster. Goffredo pushed on the fork again. The Austrian chewed and swallowed even more avidly.

The huddled-over stranger-thief had narrow blue eyes with a doggedly friendly look to them, and he was beardless like himself. With his bird's-eye view of the man's crown, Goffredo could tell that if his blond hair were combed back into place, instead of hanging wildly in his face as it did now, it would reveal a high handsome forehead. With a yank of his head, Goffredo indicated that he should stand. It was dawning on him that if the man were really an *Austrian deserter* he wasn't exactly an enemy.

The prongs of the hay fork accompanied the man's chest—partially bare where the gold buttons had come off—as he rose to his full height. Taller than me, damn it, thought Goffredo. The officer was armed, too—the silver-plated pistol shown in its under-arm holster and there was naturally his sword to contend with.

Was the hay fork going to be enough?

As if he could read his thoughts, the other man unbuckled his holster and sheath and placed them on the floor. Then he spoke.

Goffredo couldn't believe his ears.

"Cheese good," he had said in Italian.

Sandor Kemenj was from a wealthy Hungarian family and spoke four languages well. Italian, however, was not one of these four. He thought it best to introduce himself and tell of his intentions in French or English (certainly not German, the language of Austria), but before he could utter another word, the noise of clomping horses made both men glance towards the shuttered windows.

"You me hide," Kemenj coaxed in more of his broken Italian. "Austria no good." That was an Austrian light-cavalry patrol out in the street. "Tomorrow, go," he added pointing at his own chest.

The reaction of the cheese-maker, whose expression Sandor still couldn't interpret, was impressively swift and nothing less than miraculous: he opened a low trap door under the stairs and threw Sandor's pistol and sword inside.

"Get in there, then."

Sandor dived into a dark closet with ageing cheeses, which smelled so ripe and strong on their shelves that he could hardly breathe. With his instilled self-

discipline, one of the few achievements of his five years of outpost assignments in some of the poorest and muddiest parts of the Empire, he concentrated on drawing each next breath without coughing or gagging, so as not to give himself away. He didn't understand or have time to understand the miracle of why the cheese maker was hiding him; he just listened. Now came the banging on the shop shutters. Then the screeching metal hinges as the cheese-maker pulled the shutters open and unlocked the door. Three Austrians, an officer and two foot soldiers, he reckoned from the voices, stomped into the shop, making arrogant and angry comments that the cheese maker couldn't understand.

Goffredo's hands, dangling at his sides, closed repeatedly into fists, when the Austrians started touching and poking at his young cheeses on the table by the whey vat. Abruptly the officer asked in Italian if he'd seen an Austrian deserter in officer dress like his.

"No," Goffredo answered. He couldn't abide the idea of Austrian soldiers galloping through Piedmont as if they owned it. The man he was hiding was running from them. That man was doing the right thing. There was a good reason for not giving them that man—revenge.

"*Vino? Vino?*" the officer demanded.

Goffredo responded that he didn't have any wine.

The officer looked him in the eye and said something to the effect that he was a liar. Then he pointed at his mouth; the sense was that he could smell the wine on Goffredo's breath. The row of small *toma* cheeses fell under his gaze, and he indicated to one of his men to snatch them up. On their way out, the officer snarled something else; presumably that they would come back. Goffredo closed and bolted the shutters behind them.

It was dead quiet in the shop. He could almost believe himself to be alone. Time to liberate—what to call him?—his guest? It was very late now. He supposed that his Austrian deserter was probably still hungry...and thirsty.

When the closet door opened, Sandor emerged from the cheeses with Goffredo's inherited copy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract, or Principles of Political Right* in hand and a grin on his face.

"Rousseau!" he exclaimed, adding something enthusiastic in French, then in German, then interrupting himself and apologizing ("*Excusez-moi!*") for that tactless choice, finishing in yet another language Goffredo couldn't fathom in the least, but he was very glad that he liked Rousseau so much. He just wondered why he had deserted the Austrian army, or for that matter, joined it in the first place.

"You come with me," he said, imitating the act of eating. He led the way up the stairs.

Sandor sat at the table in the chair the cheesemaker wanted him to use. It was a chair with arms and padding; it was the best chair in the small room.

"Austrians win," he said.

“And you deserted after having won?” Goffredo set another opened bottle of red wine on the table.

“Me Hungary. Forced to Austria Army.” Sandor bit into another piece of cheese; he wanted to express much more but couldn’t. He had loved Rousseau and his grand notion of a General Will, and yet as an Austrian officer he had had to put down revolts by starving peasants fighting not for political rights but for a crust of bread. Up to now, his only consolation for such a humiliating fate had been that when the Hungarian national hero, Lajos Kossuth, would finally be in a position to call for an army to fight for Hungarian freedom from Austria, he would be ready to make an immediate contribution to the cause.

“Hungry, eh?” said Goffredo, watching him chew. He pushed the bottle closer to the other’s elbow. “Try this.”

Sandor drank a long sip of wine. Then he gazed at Goffredo thoughtfully. “Warm.” He drew circles in the air with both arms, to signify well-being.

“Where do you want to go?” Goffredo asked.

“Rome.” His narrow blue eyes smouldered with intensity.

Goffredo gave a guffaw. “Why?”

“All hope dead. Only Rome and Venice have government liberty.”

“You Austrians are the ones that took that freedom away.”

“No, me Hungary! Me Budapest! Grand river there, like here. Same river, but different people.”

“What’s the name of your river?”

“Dunai.”

“Our river’s the Po.”

“Rome also, river.”

“And so?”

“I go Rome,” said Sandor.

“But how can the Romans hope to defend the city? Besides, there’s the Pope.”

“No. New Pope escape Rome after revolt. Liberty at Rome now. At Rome is Garibaldi.”

“Garibaldi’s in *Rome*?”

“Also Mazzini. They want volunteers.”

“Mazzini wants volunteers! I’ve read things that he’s written about founding a republic...” Goffredo’s voice trailed off.

Sandor waited with a light-hearted patience that he hadn’t felt in a long time. He liked this Italian. He liked being here. He had been given a chance to hang his old life up in the wardrobe and choose a new one. Yesterday, a bored commissioned officer in God-forsaken places, today a deserter from the Austrian Army, and tomorrow? In the past he’d managed to accept the contradictions of his condition, but now he felt motivated, and GLAD, GLAD, GLAD.

His cheesemaker was mumbling something:

“A s’sa duv’a a s’nas ma a s’sa pa ‘nduv a s’mieur.”

“*Comment?*” he asked, puzzled, in French.

“It means ‘you know where you were born but not where you’ll die’.”

“My name Sandor.” He paused for effect. “I born Budapest. I die Rome?”

“My name Goffredo. I born Bassignana. I die Rome with you?”

Their eyes locked. Then they broke into laughter and toasted with wine.

Before they went to bed for the night, Goffredo gave Sandor a set of peasant clothes and burned his officer’s uniform in the fireplace. In the morning after breakfast, he brought out his father’s shoes. Fortunately they fit, because the Austrian-issue boots would have been a sure give-away. Then he went down into his cellar and returned with strange hay-encrusted balls about the size of large stones.

“Kill Austrians?” asked Sandor in high-spirits.

“No, it’s cheese you eat, *sarass del fen!*” Goffredo knew the Hungarian wouldn’t understand that in standard Italian this meant ‘ricotta under hay’ so he didn’t even try to explain. “Cheese!” he repeated merrily. “Soldiers who come to look and steal don’t find it.” A *sarass del fen* looked like a wad of hay, not something to eat.

“Here, catch!” he added, throwing one to Sandor and, freed of more than one weight, feeling in the best of spirits himself.

This was food that kept for a long time. This was food for long journeys.

Like theirs to Rome.