

Excerpt from UGO RICCARELLI, *IL DOLORE PERFETTO* (PERFECT PAIN), a novel.
Mondadori, 2004.
Winner of the 2004 Strega Award

English translation © 2013 by Anne Milano Appel

In memory of my Mother
and my grandmother Maria Maddalena Rinaldini,
for us simply Annina.

Gadda isn't baroque. It's the world that's baroque.

CARLO E. GADDA

Just a second or two before she died, sagging against the walnut tree in the garden, Annina emerged from the shadows in which her mind had been hiding for many years, and suddenly, in those brief moments before death claimed her, as if she were in flight, saw again the house with the pine tree and Mena propped against a corner of the credenza, praying; in front of Mena she saw her mother giving birth to her, screaming with a pain that to her seemed perfect, and only at the end, for a brief instant, did she catch sight of her own head coming out of that body, red and swollen from its labor, and for the last time smelled the scent of violets belonging to her twin brother who from inside the womb was pushing her out into the world.

It was like a flash, a sneeze with a force so intense that Annina had to clutch the walnut tree with both hands to keep from falling, and her last breath came out in a weak sigh, nearly a whisper.

“Just look ...” she said, surprised by that amazing sight.

Then a smile softened her mouth, and she slid slowly toward the base of the trunk, where she stopped forever.

At the time the Teacher arrived in Colle, they were completing construction of the station out towards the plain, and the first houses of the new district were appearing around it. They were springing up like mushrooms, and people seemed excited by the arrival of the railroad that would bring trains and progress to the town. The main building was not yet finished, so passengers had to get off much farther back, toward Padule Lungo, and continue on to Colle Alto by catching a ride on an occasional carriage or, relying on the kindness of a farmer, on a wagon pulled by oxen.

From the road leading up to the town, which for thousands of years had been perched on the hill, you could clearly see the fields cut in two by the railway: a crossways scar that from Padule cut into the geometric patchwork of farms, bounded by ditches and rows of cypresses. It seemed like the world was sharply divided: to the left, along the still white strip of the roadbed, a multitude of people, carts, wagons, a flurry of ants coming and going between the railroad tracks and the houses under construction. To the right, just beyond the station, the side where the iron track had already been laid, a world at peace; at most you could see some faint whirls of dust raised by a plow in the fields separated by the train's path.

The Teacher had asked a land-steward for a ride on his cart, after helping the man load the last sacks of beans on the train that would quickly set out for the city again. He was the son of farming folk, and for a moment the smell of vegetables and the touch of the rough jute had made him feel at home again, mitigating a certain feeling of somehow being a traitor, since he was the only one in his family who had studied.

He had come from the south, from a village near Sapri not all that different from Colle; it too perched on a hill, but without the railroad and with more poverty. He had arrived with two suitcases: in the first some underwear, a few pairs of pants, a couple of shirts and a black suit identical to the one he was wearing. The other was full of books, and was as heavy as a corpse.

For a moment, as soon as the train moved, the Teacher felt like he was drowning; he stood there watching the convoy of wagons slide slowly toward the direction from which he had come, until the suitcases were already on the cart and the steward called to him to leave. Then he went over to the farmer, wiped his palms on his pants and put out a hand to introduce himself, the way well-mannered men do. He said his first and last name, and thanked him for his kindness.

The steward was a man of few words. Hearing the stranger's unusual way of speaking, which had never been heard in those parts, he thought about the fact that the railway, in addition to bringing seeds and vegetables, would be carrying who knows what kind of people up there. The world was vast, and Colle had now latched on to something it was unfamiliar with. Nevertheless, the young man seemed decent. He spoke with a strange accent, but correctly. He had helped him out, like civil people do, and now the steward had to respond to his outstretched hand, if only out of a sense of hospitality that men owe one another.

They made the trip in silence, the steward because he felt awkward with a stranger, the other because he was steeped in melancholy and intent on observing the unknown world in which his new life would soon begin.

Only when they neared the gate in the walls, along with Colle's first houses, did the steward ask where he could leave him. The Teacher replied:

“Where there's a hotel, or someone who will rent a room.”

Then he paused for a few seconds, and as if ashamed of what he was about to say, lowered his eyes and nearly whispered: “I'm the new teacher, I've come to teach school.”

The driver turned toward him abruptly. “The Teacher!” he exclaimed. “My compliments to you!” He added: “The widow Bartoli will be able to accommodate you,” and then fell silent until they stopped in front of a stone cottage, just outside the walls.

Climbing down quickly, he knocked and told the woman the new teacher had arrived. Then he snatched the baggage from the hands of the young man who’d been quick to unload it.

“*Maestro*, don’t bother with that. Leave it to me.”

He set the suitcases on the sidewalk and took off his hat. With a certain deference he again held out his hand.

“You’ll see, you’ll like it here in Colle. We’re simple people, but we love life. A quiet life, living in peace. You’ll see, I’m sure you’ll like it here.”

He went away touching the brim of his hat, leaving the Teacher in the hands of the widow Bartoli, the woman who rented rooms.

The man heard someone call to him from the top of the stairs:

“*Signor Maestro*, come in, come in, it’s turning cool now.”

He stared out at the plain another moment, towards the setting sun, and for a second he seemed to see his sea shining behind Padule Lungo.

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The widow Bartoli was an attractive woman, in her thirties, who’d been left alone when her husband died during the construction of the viaduct, down at Padule; a master builder, he’d been crushed by the wheels of a locomotive which caught his coat as he was checking the seal of a drain during a thunderstorm. Her husband had left her that six-room house, in which she lived with her eight year old son Bartolo, her grief over that sudden, heart-rending death, and a lasting phobia for any type of wheeled transport. Starting with trains.

At the time the steward dropped the Teacher off at her door, two foremen from the station’s construction site were rooming in the little stone house near the walls. The third room was occupied by the newcomer, accommodations that pleased him immediately: the room wasn’t large, but it was furnished with sobriety and taste. A small bed, a bedside table, a cherry wood wardrobe and a table against the wall. It took only an instant to empty his suitcase of clothes, then he carefully arranged his copious books in the remaining space in the closet. The house was located at the top of the hill, so from his window he could see almost the entire plain, with the approaching railway, the houses under construction, the fields, the roads.

The widow was a considerate person, orderly and precise. For a reasonable sum they agreed on rent for the room, breakfast and an evening meal which the three lodgers, the landlady and little Bartolo all ate together in the big kitchen. Immediately after supper the foremen went out for an evening at the tavern, returning for bed, not too late, whereas the Teacher did not usually go out, remaining in his room with his books and the cramped writing that filled sheet after sheet of paper.

He was quite busy with his new job, with the thirty school children, and spent whatever time was left – after preparing lessons and correcting the children’s assignments – on the reading and writing he did at

night, working until very late. On Sundays then, not only did he not go to Mass like the others, but he took solitary walks along the railway, a book in one hand and a cigar in the other.

This sort of isolation struck the widow Bartoli, perhaps stirring her curiosity. Certainly she considered him strange. Every so often, timidly, she would test the waters, inquiring through discreet questioning whether the Teacher needed anything, if everything was going well, at home and at school, but all she ever received were polite, reassuring replies.

Why did a young man so handsome, educated and courteous insist on always keeping to himself? Colle Alto was certainly no Mecca, still, there were a couple of good taverns, and a place outside Town Hall, where every week an orchestra played music for dancing. Then too, the damned railroad brought the city very close, and with it the delights and pursuits that a healthy young man would not pass up.

And so, day after day, almost without realizing it, the widow began musing about the Teacher's life, a routine that, like a trickle of water dripping steadily on a rock, carved out a small breach in her solitude. Indeed, though occupied by the busy tempo of her duties as a mother and as a landlady with three people to look after, from the day her husband died her existence had been marked by loneliness.

Fosco Bartoli had never been a talkative man. A rather practical soul, a hard worker with a somewhat diffident temperament, for his wife he had nevertheless been a faithful, patient husband. Above all he was a man capable of listening, and in the years in which he'd shared a roof with her he'd always had a moment of attention for his wife, a supportive look, even if only a quick nod of understanding that was enough for her to feel she was part of something strong, of what she needed to face the struggle of a simple existence, the iniquities of life, or a great sorrow like the loss of their first daughter, whom a twisted bowel had taken away in the blink of an eye.

From the ill-fated evening when they came to rush her, running, down to the viaduct, to find her husband mangled to death by the iron locomotive, she hadn't been able to find anywhere, in anyone, something that could restore at least a little of that sense of completeness.

Months had passed, and she struggled hard to raise a small child who would have only a distant memory of his father. She filled the hours cleaning, keeping the house in order and taking care of her lodgers; in that way, with the days lined up one after another, their repeated rhythms unchanging, time passed quickly and dissolved into the blue-gray horizon of the Padule. But at night, when the two foremen had gone to bed, and little Bartolo was already lost in dreams, the house fell silent and loneliness weighed heavily on the widow.

Then she'd lie awake for hours, eyes open in the dark, listening to the silence, thinking not so much about her past life, as about the life she would have been able to have with her husband if those damn wheels hadn't crushed him; this thought had become the constant companion of her nights, the only testimony of a subtle pain that prevented her from resting or, at times, the only soothing tea that would lead her gently toward sleep.

It was with some astonishment, therefore, that one night, in the small hours, she caught herself thinking about the Teacher's life, absorbed as she was by a desire to find out something more about him, about his withdrawn routines, about those long solitary walks. She was almost frightened to see that these thoughts had actually been with her for many days and nights, accompanying her through the rooms of the house, or down the hill toward the marsh, where she would imagine the Teacher walking, no longer alone, but in her company, reading her a book and telling her about himself, about his work.

When she realized it, her heart leaped in her chest, and she quickly turned over between the sheets as if to push the thought aside, disassociate herself from it, and let it sink in the heavy tide of guilt that she already felt rising in her, as if she had betrayed her husband, and he had caught her doing something indecent

with another man. In his house. In her thoughts.

Yet, despite trying to get to sleep – and forcing herself to return to the old habit of imagining Fosco Bartoli and a life that she would never have with him – in her dreams the imposing figure of her husband slowly changed, and his face always ended up taking on the youthful, gentle features of the Teacher; sometimes they even dissolved, softening even more and slipping with her into the comfort of a warm, restful sleep in which, not infrequently, her lodger dared to give her the same understanding look with which her late spouse had been able to soothe her.

Living and dreaming, adrift in a vision that moves slowly toward a face. Raising a hand in a greeting that is a hope fantasized in darkness. At times living and dreaming are one and the same, and so the widow, almost without being conscious of it, superimposed on the sweet memory of a husband she no longer had the now familiar countenance of the Teacher, his big hands, his polite gestures. Even his smell, a blend of his Toscano, and the ink and papers that littered his small rented room. The trickle of her thoughts had carved out an opening and she quickly filled it with love, with a new gentleness, a radiance and light that made her flourish.

The lodgers themselves became aware of that springtime, a faint electricity that touched even little Bartolo and made him the sprightly, cheerful child he would forever be. Even the Teacher was bewildered by that manifestation of *joie de vivre*, and despite the discomfort of a delicate situation, one Sunday afternoon he found the courage to invite the widow to join him on his usual walk along the railway. A grown man by now, beard, vest and a fine black bow tie over his immaculate white shirt, he issued the invitation almost in a whisper, while his hands worried the brim of his hat, which he had removed as a sign of respect.

The widow accepted with a smile, so naturally that it made the Teacher think his fears had been excessive; and just as naturally, once they were out of the house, she offered him her arm and with her other hand took care that Bartolo stayed beside her. Along the short stretch of road leading from the walls down to the fields and from there further down to the railroad, the leisurely stroll of those three people seemed entirely natural to the idle gazes of the few inhabitants of Colle who were sitting outdoors, enjoying the warmth of an early spring.

Surrounded by the magical aura of a love tempered over many nights of solitude, the widow Bartoli's joy radiating around her silenced in an instant any possible hint of scandal or gossip about the relationship between the young Teacher and an older woman who was still wearing mourning. Perhaps a spell had been cast, or perhaps an unexpected good sense had descended on Colle, but from the moment that new love was clearly displayed by their walk, it was greeted with no surprise, like the evidence of a natural, even long-standing union. The only habit the village allowed itself, without ever losing it, was to continue referring to the woman as "the widow Bartoli", even though her life was now officially joined to that of the Teacher.

If the journey from the coast of Campania to Colle had been long and arduous for the Teacher, being away from the places where he'd been born and raised, and where his family was, seemed even more arduous to him.

And though he considered it his mission to leave his home behind to go to a new job and to a new world, every time the sun set over Padule Lungo, lighting up the water of the marsh, a hand seized him tightly by the throat and nearly cut off his breath. A grip from which only one single thought enabled him to wrench himself free: the conviction that this journey of his was essential.

Against the red sky that lit up the plain beyond the window, he glimpsed again in quick succession

the old days spent with classmates, studying and discussing; his cousin Salvatore who left to follow Pisacane^[1] and was shot in the back by the farmer he was supposed to liberate; and this new Italian state, born in the North, whose only manifestation in the countryside of Sapri was its heavy-handed soldiers.

His father had been a land-steward for the feudal estate of the Portillo Barons, and had wanted his son to become a teacher so that he would not have to experience the toil and sweat, inadequately compensated, of those who cultivate the land. Going to Sapri to study every day, on horseback and after that a stretch on foot, hoping to find in books a road other than the dusty, muddy one of the farm: an avenue of respectability afforded by a title, by a piece of paper with a name written in black and gold, in a fine hand with flourishes worthy of a man who is a scholar.

But he seemed to read other things in those books. Or rather, what he read in books confirmed his impression that the Portillo Barons, with their brocaded satins and carriages, were merely overbearing buffoons. The same could be said of the myriad of lackeys whom the fine *signori* brought along with them when they passed through the fields to hunt, as well as their henchmen; even the notables of Sapri who hung on their every word hoping for a smile or a nod of greeting. The Barons held the latter in much greater consideration than all the poor unfortunates who made their lands produce in exchange for a paltry crust of bread.

Then one day his friend Mannuzzu came from Naples, bringing the books of a German philosopher who was interested in the destiny of those impoverished wretches. Together they began meeting with other friends to talk about land given to the peasants, about exploitation, about people who amass wealth on the backs of others, about social struggle.

To these associates he was the cousin of Pisacane's Salvatore, shot in the back by the man he was supposed to liberate, and they addressed him with a tone of respect proper to someone who, on balance, already knew certain things.

There were months of intense readings, continuous and grueling, so much so that his father, seeing him constantly bent over his pages, lost in thought, began to doubt his son's intelligence. What could this learning be, he thought, could it possibly be so lengthy and complicated that it consumed your eyes and robbed you of your sleep? What could be so mysterious about knowledge that it had to be hidden away in books hefty as a crate of fruit, thick as a brick? Sometimes at night he got up and silently approached his son's room to observe him, bent over the table, as he wrote page after page by candlelight, copying intricate diagrams full of numbers from books written by people with foreign names.

That his son and those studies of his were strange was confirmed to him on the day of the young man's graduation, after the huge celebration party; the father had invited all the local farmers to mark the great event, since all in all it was truly an exceptional feat that the son of a simple farm worker, of one of *them*, had managed to prove that even peasants have a mind. Yet, faced with the joyful faces of those poor people, their compliments, their cheerfulness, his very learned son could only utter a few embarrassed words, then rush off to hide in his room. He found him there late that night, engrossed in his books, of course.

"That's enough studying, you're a teacher now and you should celebrate," he told him, his voice unsteady from too much wine. In his contented mind he pictured him wearing a fine suit, in the city, strolling along the boulevard with a newspaper in his hand, while passers-by turned and greeted him with respectful smiles. His son, however, hunched over on the bed, his eyes strained from reading, looked at him joylessly and said:

"I'm not a teacher of anything, father, and I will celebrate only when the peasants who are shouting like fools down below start raising their voices against the Barons and make them give them the land they work, which belongs only to those who shed their blood, sweat and tears tilling and hoeing it."

“Teaching is not a cause for celebration,” he continued, “there’s much to be done out there, in this new Italy, created by the Piedmontese for their own interests. You’ll see, father, I’ll teach people how to read and write, I’ll teach tomorrow’s citizens to do a little simple arithmetic so they can see how the world is molded by those in command. We have a future, and we have hope: people need to understand this, and realize the profound injustice which results from always having a God, a King, or a Baron, or a State to tell us who we are, to tell us what to do in every situation, how to live, how to die, how to think. We have to go and see for ourselves, learn, roll up our sleeves and get to work. Italy, Naples, Rome, Florence, Genoa, Milan are out there waiting, full of people who must learn to read, write and count so they can no longer be fooled.”

The father did not understand, maybe because of the wine; perhaps it was the decisive tone in which his son spoke to him that night, but for the first time he felt that he was losing something forever, and that the young man huddled on the bed no longer belonged to him. He was an untethered calf, or rather a colt ready to run like the wind across the plain. He saw the King and the Baron, gentlemen in tail coat and top hat, and then a vast plain of wheat, and on the plain a city called New Italy, full of strangers who spoke a perfect language which, nonetheless, made no sense. He glimpsed all this in an instant and he was frightened. He had always thought of the future only in terms of his son, a teacher, well-off and respected; in Sapri, because Salerno would have been reaching too far. But now that young man, who at one time had been his son, was talking about Genoa and Florence, about Milan, a city that he’d barely even heard of, where there was an Italy that was waiting just for him, the boy who had been his son and who now had to go out and teach.

He closed the door gently and, walking slowly, went to his room so as not to disturb him any further. His wife was already waiting for him in bed, clutching a rosary and murmuring whispered prayers, her eyes shining, her gaze almost ecstatic. Between his drinking and his distress over the conversation with his son, his life seemed ridiculous to him, suspended between the noise of the festivities that still came from down below and the monotonous mumbling of that muttered chant.

He felt like running away; he wanted to conquer his fatigue and the dizziness that made him stagger, get out of that room, maybe go to Milan, maybe even just to the sea, find a boat and leave those places behind forever. As soon as he thought of the sea he recalled his nephew Salvatore: Salvatore’s body with his back ripped open by buckshot meant for wolves. He was found lying on the shore, arms stretched out in front of him as if he were about to dive into the water to get away, to swim away and flee the rage of the peasants he’d wanted to liberate. He saw his nephew and he heard his brother crying and yelling, cursing Pisacane and the revolutionaries, as he knelt beside the slain body.

He understood.

Salvatore vanished and in his place he saw his own son, handsome, young, with his teaching degree and his back torn apart by a shotgun blast. Because that’s how people who want to change the world end up, those who want to replace the landowners with the peasants, and lose their reason and their sleep and give up their own freedom for the freedom of others, cursed be the day. He saw his son rigid in death, lying on a shore in Milan, and tears filled his eyes.

It was his wife’s voice that called him back to the room, as she stroked him gently.

“Anto” she asked him, “are you crying? Aren’t you happy?”

The man looked at his wife, but in reality his eyes were seeing something very far away.

“If you only knew,” he said in a cracked voice, “the sea of Milan, how sad, better you don’t know...”

As agreed with his friends, the Teacher, when the time came, managed to obtain a teaching position in a location that was not near Sapri. It wasn't difficult to find one, since in that Italy which still lacked everything, there was no shortage of teaching posts for a young teacher who wanted to travel. That was the plan devised by his small group of revolutionaries: spread out through the country to carry their ideas far away from that den of snakes that had slain the revolution. The three teachers, two railway workers and a promising expert in industrial mechanics said goodbye to one another, promising to keep in touch with frequent letters once they reached their destinations. One day it would be time for them to return, stronger and more organized, to talk about social justice and freedom, even in their homes.

Life in Colle immediately appeared different from the hard existence he had always known. There was no lack of work, since looking after thirty children was no easy matter, but he was listened to and respected, and had enough time to continue his studies, writing and recording his observations about the local residents. He scrutinized everything with a great deal of attention. Often, with the excuse of getting to know the families better, he would ask questions, inquiring about the working conditions and the treatment of employees.

He had the two foremen accompany him to the railroad construction site, to get to know the workers, as well as to Padule Lungo to meet the fishermen, and to the kilns where they were manufacturing products for the new homes that were springing up like mushrooms around the station. Colle was experiencing a great upheaval, the new district swarming with ants putting up structures, laying out streets and extending the tracks of the railway, while up above, in the old town, shopkeepers and artisans were getting ready for whatever would be needed to clothe and feed the people whom that arc of the future was sweeping with it at a gallop.

From his window looking out on the plain, or sitting outdoors beside the walls, the Teacher would observe that activity for hours on end, trying to discern its hidden mechanisms, its tensions, its scope and prospects, formulating hypotheses which he then jotted down in his notebooks and confirmed in his books. All that fervor seemed to express something new, a different spirit that he, having grown up in Sapri's countryside, had never known except through the descriptions of Marx or Bakunin. And it was through them that he understood that all that turmoil was merely an infinitesimal part of human labor, of that immense quantity of labor that elsewhere forced hundreds of people into confinement in huge factories to weave textiles or melt steel. At times, that thought made him shudder, making it hard to breathe: he pictured huge buildings teeming with people who were made to toil like slaves in jobs whose fruit was not theirs to enjoy, hidden in darkness, buried by smoke, deafened by noise, absorbed in the production of a common destiny of drudgery that he saw as immeasurable, perfect pain.

This is what the Teacher would be thinking; he thought about the factories, even as he walked through the fields around him: the fields too were places of atrocious drudgery, notwithstanding their splendid forms and colors, like these in Colle. Of course, the farmers and peasants were just as poor here as where he came from, but their features were less sharp, their faces more open to a smile, almost as if the beauty of the countryside, the gentleness of the small rounded knolls that sloped down toward a plain soft as cotton wool, had also softened its inhabitants and opened the door of life to them more so than for the people who worked the Portillo lands. And then there were the colors, the red and brown earth, checkered with green where their labor had enabled orderly fields to grow, the yellow of the wheat that climbed along the slopes, the blue water of the marsh, Padule Lungo, which shone golden beneath the setting sun.

Even their language took on the color of the fields, it was sweet music, the sound of a flute or violin. The accent up on the hill in Colle Alto was broader, full of hendecasyllabic rhythms, almost like reciting poetry; the speech heard down towards the station was less consistent, more variable, a blend of the transients who came there day after day to live and work.

But of all the things Colle offered, the Teacher was struck by the polite kindness of its women. Not that the women from his region weren't courteous, but they maintained a certain reserve, in any and all circumstances, almost an unsociability that isolated them in a kind of world apart, even when they became wives or grandmothers. The women of Colle, by contrast, were not afraid to smile or talk to strangers with a grace and gentleness that was captivating.

The Teacher was rather intimidated by that cordiality, especially in the first few weeks he spent there; while on the one hand he took pleasure in the affability with which the widow Bartoli treated him, on the other hand he accepted it with the misgivings and caution typical of someone accustomed to viewing familiarity towards a stranger as having, if not an ulterior motive, something certainly unusual about it. As time passed, however, observing and living among the other women of the town, he increasingly abandoned that sort of suspicion and began to enjoy the pleasure of a conversation, of an exchange of greetings, of an anecdote, though brief, colored by that broad, sunny way of speaking they had which made it epic.

At some point, consequently, the days spent working and studying, capped by the Sunday walks he took to season the day of rest, began to seem too lonely and dreary, and he realized that he'd like to flavor them with a side dish of words that were for him, and for him alone. He wasn't the type to go to a tavern or go dancing in the piazza like his two fellow boarders. Besides that, his status as teacher also prevented him from going around town and striking up a conversation longer than might be necessary for a polite exchange of words during his walk.

There could be a possible solution. The widow Bartoli was there, near at hand, always polite and interested in him. Her discreet questions, the small attentions each day which earlier he had politely evaded, little by little flattered him and, as time went by, actually raised his spirits. He awoke in the morning in a hurry to go down to breakfast, mostly to be able to enjoy the cordiality the widow showed him, to breathe even for a quarter of an hour that air of joy and springtime that flowed from her gestures and her words as she served the boarders at the table. It seemed like a small thing, a biscuit baked specially for him, a light touch on his jacket to brush away some speck, the rustle of her skirt against the chair, yet fortified by the tiniest gesture, the Teacher felt able to leave the house for work with enough strength to face the world.

And so, on an unusually mild Sunday afternoon in February, as soon as the widow had finished cleaning up, the Teacher got up his nerve and decided to approach her. He had thought and thought all morning about what to say, a brief preamble to apologize for his boldness and lead into the subject – almost a preface, he'd said to himself – and then the request to take a walk together, so they could talk a little, leaving the woman a very likely refusal as a way out. He would understand, of course, her position as a widow, the impropriety of being seen together, and all the rest. He had considered every aspect many times and so he felt he was ready to give it a try.

It was the first time he was about to address a mature woman in similar circumstances. The love he had experienced in his countryside was made up of furtive glances, rapid gestures stolen from fathers or husbands, consumed hastily. Not even time to breathe. Here it was a matter of acting openly, being careful not to commit any offense. A grown woman, widowed and alone. And so, his head filled with all of these considerations, the Teacher went up to the widow Bartoli as she was getting ready to embroider: she had just sat down beside the kitchen door, open to the sky and the plain.

Heart pounding and hands wringing the brim of his hat, he appeared before the woman, the sky and the plain, and tried to speak, to counter with every ounce of his courage the wall of beauty that she and the landscape erected in front of him. He hadn't hesitated when it came to leaving his home and his family, he wanted to be a revolutionary and change the world, yet not even the few remarks he'd planned, a few simple words of invitation, came out of his mouth as he stood before the smiling gaze of the widow Bartoli.

The Teacher stood there mute for a few seconds more. He reflected that it was all too beautiful and profoundly unfair, unfair as only too much beauty compared to a man's words may be. The smile of a

woman in love, the blue sky and, beneath the sky, the plain that dissolved in the distant shimmer of the Padule. It said it all, and it was too much for a polite speech of invitation, pondered for hours, assembling, word by word, sentences that were now inadequate.

The Teacher surrendered. He looked up at the sky another moment, then plunged into the widow's eyes and, in a whisper, could only say:

“Shall we walk?”

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Love enfolded the widow Bartoli and the Teacher so inevitably that no one, from Colle to Piana and beyond, was ever surprised by that union, though it might have given rise to gossip and all kinds of talk, if for no other reason than the marked difference in the lovers' ages. Not to mention the scandal that might have been caused by the fact that, in the many years of their love, even after children were born and there was no lack of hardships, they never showed the slightest intention of formalizing their relationship through marriage.

For that matter, given his anarchist beliefs, the Teacher did not recognize the authority of either the State or the Church and, in any case, since the day of her first walk with the young man, the widow Bartoli had never made any mention of the possibility of their marrying. As soon as they returned home towards evening, she had simply served dinner to the boarders and finished washing up, then she and the Teacher began their conjugal life, sleeping in the master bedroom and transforming his old room into a study crammed with books and papers, which became, from then on, a quiet retreat for his research.

In time, when the station was completed and the railroad stretched far beyond Padule Lungo, to other plains and other towns, the children born from their union occupied the rooms that had once been rented to the two foremen, and the house beside the walls seemed to grow young again amid the hustle and bustle of that unusual family and the love that the two were always able to keep alive.

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[1] Carlo Pisacane, Duke of San Giovanni (1818-1857), was an Italian patriot and one of the first Italian socialist thinkers. When Giuseppe Mazzini, a chief proponent for the unification of Italy, decided to organize an expedition to provoke a peasant uprising in the Kingdom of Naples, Pisacane volunteered, arriving at Sapri in Campania with a few followers in June 1857. They attempted to reach the region of Campania known as the Cilento but got hardly any assistance from the inhabitants and were quickly overpowered.