

# Short Stories, Stories of the Courtyard

*from the 1950s, 60s and beyond*

## STORIES OF EMIGRANTS, part two WITH GIOVANNI, THE THIRD GRANDFATHER (IN RETROSPECT)

In the meantime, even in Italy the years were passing by....

Ida learned to accept the fact that having Giovanni was impossible. What's more, he had never written to her, and she married Sante, Giovanni's older brother.

By 1923, Ida had already given birth to ten children: Evelina, the oldest, who died of the Spanish flu when she was sixteen; Fernando; Gaston, who lost his life at the age of two burned by boiling water from a big pot; Renata; Silvano; Renato; Oriano, who died in the Navy at Rhodes during a battle with the English fleet; and another three children, newborns who died a few weeks after their birth.

*In those days, my grandmother said, the Angioletto rang every day!* This was the name for the bell that tolled when a person died.

Despite the harshness of life, the many births and sorrows, Ida at 37 was still a pleasant woman with fair hair, blue eyes, light complexion, and a pretty face, symmetrical with a perfect little nose, well proportioned and slightly tipping upward.

Ida's generation, even for women, didn't boast any special intimacy with soap and water, even less so in a rural context like the courtyard. Still, Ida took decent care of her appearance and, especially when she went to Lucca (Lucca was and still is for the Lucchese people only the part enclosed within its Walls), never failed to put a silk scarf around her neck, attached with a golden (or gold colored) broach, full of shiny stones, whether they were genuine or false. And with her good shoes, generally shiny black leather, and her purse of the same color, each week she walked three kilometers to town and three kilometers back.

In February of that year, 1923, a letter arrived, signed by Giovanni and Cesare, a few lines saying they would return "forever" in the spring.

Ida began to feel a strange and exaggerated agitation in her soul, for which she had no explanation. Inside herself she said, *I have no illusions!* But despite her will, the thought went there. She asked herself what he would be like and how he would view her after so many years. They arrived on the day before the eve of the celebration of S. Pietro.

In the courtyard, two well-dressed men came down from a beautiful shiny coach pulled by two horses. From her window, Ida immediately recognized Giovanni. He was the same, but more handsome; tall, thin, with dark hair and skin, green eyes, and an aquiline nose that made him even more attractive. She ran down the stairs, but at each step felt her legs trembling more and more and the joy became a kind of fear. She arranged her hair, breathed deeply, and came down into the courtyard.

Around the coach were all her children, yelling and jumping for joy, anxious to eat the candies that the uncles would surely have brought them. Sante was already there. The celebration of greetings and hugs exploded uncontrollably and, as could be predicted, it spread through the entire courtyard. Very soon, a crowd of men, women, and children had gathered around the coach. The two brothers hugged and kissed the friends that they recognized. There was an enormous confusion, interrupted only occasionally by a brief silence when Giovanni and Cesare asked about someone who, because of age or the war or tuberculosis, was no longer there.

Meanwhile Sante helped the driver to unload the baggage. The coach seemed to have become a magician's hat: All kinds of things came out, luggage, bags, purses, trunks, paintings, Even the candies made from honey or chocolate would arrive. Giovanni took three handfuls and scattered them across the courtyard as one would throw corn to the chickens. The children threw themselves onto the "feed", pushing against each other, yelling and laughing. Then the celebration continued, but in a calmer way, within the walls of the homes.

The two brothers had brought Ida a broach as a present.

*It would be Bologna gold, which would be shameful when coming to Lucca,* began Sante, joking.

*It's real gold,* Giovanni asserted, *and the stones in the settings are real.*

After a while the three brothers closed themselves in a room that they called the sitting room. *Do you remember the agreement we made many years ago?* Giovanni asked Sante, without waiting for an answer. *You would stay here and take care of Mamma and Pappà\* while we two would go to make our fortune, that fortune that if we succeeded, would then be divided among the three of us. Well, the fortune has been made and we want to keep our word.*

Sante listened in silence with tears in his eyes.

*We worked like donkeys, but thanks also to good luck, now we are rich, Sante. We have in our American bank, the Bank of Italy, a deposit in dollars that is today equal to 600,000 Italian Lire, money that within a few days will be transferred to the Lucca branch of Bank of America and Italy, in Via Fillungo.*

Santa opened his eyes wide and for a moment was unable to breath.

*Six hundred thousand Lire? But that's an enormous amount. How is it written?* Giovanni and Cesare began laughing; then they were even crying. In fact, that was an enormous figure, a real fortune. In the days that followed the three brothers talked about business. Sante didn't want to divide anything, but to invest most of the liquidity in properties: houses, barns, and fields. The others wanted to keep everything in the bank and to live like gentlemen with the earnings.

But Sante was the oldest and, at least partially, got what he wanted.

On the west side of the courtyard (Corte Landuicci, as it is called, is divided in half by a road that crosses from north to south) lived a priest who had never had a parish, *Il Prete del Grillo*, he was called. He was the owner of the most beautiful house in the courtyard, and maybe of the town. It was very big, with a perimeter of 24 meters by 9 meters (216 sqm, multiplied by 4 floors for a total of 864 sqm). The longer sides faced south and west. This building was three stories high, and had in addition a habitable attic of the same size as the other floors. The home had a rather noble appearance. The entrance led to a broad stone stairway with a gentle climb that was distributed over two large flights of stairs leading to the first floor. There one found a large kitchen with an imposing fireplace and oven. There was also a room of over 100 sqm with four windows (two facing north, two facing south), paved with the finest terra-cotta, with ceilings painted in rich colors and floral designs, and another salon or dining room. The second floor had six bedrooms and various storerooms; the stairs made from the same material and same width continued for two more levels, bringing us to that immense habitable attic, which was also used to dry the crops. On the ground floor there were two large rooms used for storage, besides the cellar, containing four barrels and two vats, and the stalls. In front of the house there was a large farmyard with a well.

Alongside this manor house, the priest possessed another little house as well, and another single house at the end of the courtyard, both made to house two families: that of Giannino the carpenter, and that of Attila. Both of them paid the rent through their own labor. Together with three two-story barns and one three-story barn, and seven hectares (the equivalent of over 17 acres) of land, all of which constituted a single property unit with the houses and barns. The priest, who was very old, seemed intent on selling everything in order to move to the home of distant relatives. They bought the entire estate for 50,000 Lire.

This fact allows us to completely understand the real value of 600,000 Lire at that time: with this amount one could buy almost an entire village. The acquired property was added to the smaller yet dignified property that the three brothers already owned in Corte Landuicci, made up of a large house, three barns, and a hectare of land.

My father, who at that time was four years old, therefore had a serene childhood, surely enjoying the well-being brought by the uncles. He always told me that Cesare showed a special affection for him, taking him for rides in his carriage, which was kept shiny and pulled by a beautiful brown horse.

Cesare, the youngest of the three brothers, had a bit of Giovanni and a bit of Sante. He wasn't grumpy like Sante and he wasn't easy-going like Giovanni. As a result he was the most elegant, the most gentlemanly.

Understandably, everyone considered these two "Americans", as they were called in the village, to be a "good catch". So there was no shortage of girls who with their big smiles showed their happy availability.

But in those days family wealth was a stronger motive than the reasoning of the heart, even more so when, according to the popular view, the interested party had passed the age of easy "crushes".

So thanks to the diplomatic involvement of Ida or of her very young son Fernando, who was already showing himself to be a great weaver of romantic intrigues, Cesare married Emma Biancalana, Ida's sister, a woman whose very age guaranteed that no children would be brought into the world, in this way avoiding any division of the family wealth.

The three brothers did not fall victims to their wealth. Despite their riches, they conducted a normal life, the same as all the others. Every day they worked in the fields, tended to the cows in their stalls, milked them twice a day, kept the two pigs in their pen, the chickens and hens in the chicken coop, the rabbits in their cages, and the silkworms on their reeds.

Giovanni showed himself to be an indomitable worker. Even though he returned from America with half a foot less (he was missing the part of his left foot that stuck out from his leg, because it had been cut off by the wing of a plow that had fallen on it), he attacked the tall hay with his scythe with a quickness and mastery that was unrivaled in the plains.

The "American" brothers were very welcome, even by the males in the village. In fact, they were the ones who encouraged the local Associazione Combattenti (Veterans Association) to open and manage a bar in the village. Giovanni and Cesare wanted to call it the "Piccolo Club", that is to say "Clubbino". The tendency of the Lucchesi to prefer the "G" to the "C" and to substitute "R" for "L" then transformed the word "Clubbino" into "Grubbino" or "Grubbe". The Grubbino still exists at S. Angelo in Campo.

Meanwhile, time passed. Ida's last son, Matteo, was born. Evelina died of the Spanish flu. A serious eye problem that Giovanni had contracted in America was gradually compromising his vision. The doctors predicted he would lose his vision within a few years, and he did.

In 1933 Sante was hospitalized for cirrhosis of the liver, the illness of heavy drinkers, and two years later he died. In 1936 Ida and Giovanni married.

For everyone, it was a marriage of convenience. Even Fernando himself, who was convinced that the union would definitively secure the integrity of the family wealth, thought it was the result of his great diplomatic skill.

But I know that it didn't happen that way.

My grandmother, although she loved Sante and respected him, had achieved a dream. But she was the kind of person who knew how to keep her emotions inside. She enjoyed her feelings, letting things go as those around her wished, without contradicting them, while they even said that it was a marriage of interest, and her son Fernando too believed this. She at any rate knew the truth, the marvelous truth, which she protected, keeping it to herself and letting the other rot in their mistaken convictions.

For Giovanni it must have been the same. Ida felt sure. Certainly, she thought, he had remained that shy man who he was, never fully letting her know his most innermost feelings.

One day, however, while she was arranging her husband's trousers, his wallet fell to the floor. Some coins fell out, along with a series of images of saints and deceased persons. Ida tried to put everything back, but something blocked the possibility of pushing the collected papers into place. She looked inside and saw a yellowed piece of paper folded up within the lining. Being careful not to tear it, and taking a look around to make sure no one saw her, she pulled it out and opened it carefully.

She recognized the handwriting. A sudden knot in her throat seemed to want to strangle her. Through her tears, she read the words, *Tarullon eri e tarullon ti vidi, tarullon rimani se 'un ti decidi.* (You were a fool and I saw you that way; you'll remain a fool if you don't make up your mind.)

Each month Giovanni went to the bank to withdraw some of the investment earnings and he gave Cesare a third.

Then the war arrived.

To support the extraordinary and ever increasing costs of the war, Mussolini made the Decree that invited Italians to strip themselves of their jewelry in order to help the country. The same decree called for the immediate confiscation of all deposits of foreign share holdings. From one day to the next, my grandfather's and Cesare's shares in the Bank of Italy, worth more than 550,000 Lire, inevitably became the property of the Italian State.

My grandfather suddenly went from rich to poor.

Cesare died of a heart attack a few years later, maybe also because he was tired of living as a blind man together with a woman who was drunk every day.

Giovanni didn't go crazy, because a farmer with that temperament managed to bear any struggle that appeared before him.

Certainly, when he had a few drinks, he gave vent to his feelings. Seated on that chair behind the front door, between one pull on his pipe and another, he took his anger out on everyone. In his heart, though, I am convinced he thanked his brother Sante, who had insisted on investing at least a part of the family wealth in property and land.

Many years later, when the entire generation of protagonists of these remembered events had long passed away, a strange thing happened.

My uncle Renato – though no one called him by that name, rather they used the nickname *Ciò*, which was simply the diminutive of *Cioccorin*, the term of endearment that his mamma Ida had used for him when he was little – one day, while plowing a field with the tractor, saw something yellow shining in the plowed earth.

He stopped to satisfy his curiosity, of which he was particularly gifted, and picked up what immediately revealed itself as a coin.

Since I was a bit his point of reference for certain things, that evening he came to tell me what happened and to show me the coin. It was clearly gold, a 20 dollar gold piece, 3.5 centimeters in diameter and over 33 grams in weight. The year of coinage was 1895.

The next day I went to my friend who, from his passion for coin collecting, had made it his profession. Without any details from me, he took it in his hand, looked at it, turned it over silently, and looked at it again with the magnifying glass. Removing his eyeglasses and staring into my eyes, he said to me:

*Don't say anything! This is a rare coinage and in a good state of conservation. Tell me the truth, you found it while digging the ground!*

*My uncle found it, plowing.*

*Then I'll make you a proposition, he said with a big dose of enthusiasm, I will organize everything and at my expense, will bring five or six serious metal detection machines, and I assure you that we will find many other pieces the same as these, at least another 11, and we'll go halves on it.*

It took a lot of patience for me to pull myself away and stop him from insisting on his proposal, which my uncle would never have accepted. He insisted that these cases occurred in the hundreds, that ex-immigrants to America used to save and hide away the 20 dollar gold coins that they called pieces, in leather sacks, which could hold 12 of them. They secretly made holes in the ground in their fields, convinced they would never die or that they could reveal their secret before dying.

I left, but turned over his words in my head.

*Giovanni, I thought, died slowly of old age so he would have had plenty of time to reveal the secret. Cesare, on the other hand, died suddenly. Besides, the coin was found right on the edge of a trench that divided two fields, which according to the brothers' agreement, Cesare cultivated. Yes, I convinced myself, it must have been Cesare, deluded by a robber government, and before he became blind. Certainly he would never have revealed such a secret to the wife, who thanks to her wine drinking had also ruined her brain. But because of his sudden death he didn't manage to reveal it even to his brother Giovanni.*

As I expected, my uncle Renato, *Ciò*, didn't want to bring up the past, and so Cesare's secret remains scattered in a field under a patch of earth.

To be continued....

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