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THE TREASURE HUNT

Translated by Stephen Sartarelli



MANTLE

ONE

That Gregorio Palmisano and his sister Caterina had been church people since childhood was known all over town. They never missed a single morning or evening service, not a single Holy Mass or vespers, and sometimes they even went to church for no reason other than the fact that they felt like it. For the Palmisanos, the faint scent of incense and candle wax lingering in the air after the Mass was better than the smell of *ragù* to a man who hadn't eaten for ten days.

Always kneeling in the first pew, they didn't bow their heads when praying, but held them high, eyes open wide. But they weren't looking at the great crucifix over the main altar or the Blessed Virgin in sorrow at its feet. No, they never once, not even for a second, took their eyes off the priest, and they watched his every move: the way he turned the pages of the Gospel, the way he gave his benediction, the way he raised his arms when he said *Dominus vobiscum* and then concluded with *Ite, missa est*.

The truth was that they would have both liked to be priests themselves, to wear surplices, stoles, and vestments, to open the little door of the tabernacle, hold the silver chalice in their hands, administer Holy Communion to the faithful. Both of them, Caterina, too.

In fact when, as a little girl, she told her mother, Matilde, what she wanted to do when she grew up, her mama firmly corrected her.

‘You mean a nun,’ she said.

‘No, Mamma, a priest.’

‘What? And why do you want to be a priest and not a nun?’ Signora Matilde asked with a laugh.

‘Because the priest says Mass, and the nuns don’t.’

In the end they were both forced to work for their father, who was a wholesaler of foodstuffs, which he kept crammed in three large warehouses, one next to the other.

After their parents died, Gregorio and Caterina changed their merchandise, and instead of pasta, tins of tomato paste, and dried cod, they started selling antiques. It was Gregorio’s job to go around to the oldest churches in the neighbouring towns and the half-dilapidated palazzi of nobles once rich and now starving. One of their three warehouses was chock-full of crucifixes, ranging from the kind you hang from your neck on a chain to the life-size variety. There were even three or four naked crosses, huge, heavy replicas of the original, designed for being carried on the shoulder of a penitent during Holy Week processions, as Roman centurions scourged him.

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When he turned seventy and she was sixty-eight, they sold the three warehouses, but overnight they took a certain amount of objects to their home on the top floor of a building next to the town hall. It was a big apartment with six spacious rooms and a terrace, which the two never used, too big for a brother and sister who had never wanted to marry and had no nephews or nieces.

Their religious obsession increased with the reality of no longer having anything to do. They went out only to go to church, always side by side, walking fast, heads down, never returning greetings, only to race back home afterwards and lock themselves in, shutters always closed, as if they were eternally in mourning.

The grocery shopping was done by a woman who used to clean the warehouses for them, but they never allowed her into their apartment. In the morning she would find a small piece of paper pinned to the door, on which Caterina had written everything she needed, and the necessary money under the doormat.

When she returned, she would put the bags down on the floor, knock, and call out, before leaving: 'The groceries!'

They didn't own a television, and when they were still antiques dealers, nobody had ever seen them reading a book or a newspaper, but only the breviary, the way priests do.

After about ten years of this, something changed. The Palmisanos stopped going outside, stopped going to

church, and never looked out from their balcony, not even when the procession of the town's patron saint went by.

Their only contact, oral or written, with the outside world was with the woman who did the shopping.

One morning the people of Vigàta noticed that between the first and second balconies of the Palmisanos' apartment they had hung a large white banner on which were these words, in large block letters: SINNERS, REPENT!

A week later, between the second and third balconies, another banner appeared: SINNERS, WE WILL PUNISH YOU!

The following week a third one appeared, but this time it covered the entire terrace balustrade and was the largest of all: WE WILL MAKE YOU PAY FOR YOUR SINS WITH YOUR LIFE!!!

When he saw the third banner, Montalbano was worried.

'Don't make me laugh!' Mimì Augello said to him. 'They're a couple of senile old people who happen to be religious fanatics!'

'Bah!'

'Why are you not convinced?'

'The exclamation marks. There are suddenly three, where before there was one.'

'So?'

'It may be a sign that they're giving the sinners a deadline, and this is the last warning.'

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‘But who would these sinners happen to be?’

‘We’re all sinners, Mimì. Have you forgotten? Do you know whether Gregorio Palmisano has a firearms licence?’

‘I’ll go and check.’ He returned almost immediately, frowning slightly. ‘Yes, he’s got a licence all right. He requested it when he was dealing in antiques and it was granted. A revolver. But he also declared two hunting rifles and a pistol that used to belong to his father.’

‘Listen, tomorrow I want you to ask Fazio what church they used to go to, and then go and talk to the parish priest.’

‘But he’s sworn to the secrecy of the confessional!’

‘And you’re not going to ask him to reveal any secrets; you only need to find out just how far gone he thinks they are, and whether he thinks their madness is dangerous or not. In the meantime I’ll phone the mayor.’

‘What for?’

‘I want him to send a municipal policeman to the Palmisanos’ place to take down those banners.’

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Officer Landolina of the Municipal Police arrived at the Palmisanos’ home at seven in the evening. Since the Palermo match was coming on TV immediately after the evening news, he wanted to take care of things early, go home, eat, and settle into his armchair.

He knocked on the door, but nobody answered. Since Landolina, a stubborn but scrupulous man, didn’t want to

waste any time, he not only continued knocking as hard as he could, with his clenched fist, but also started kicking the door until an elderly man called out: 'Who is it?'

'Police! Open the door!'

'No.'

'Open the door right now!'

'Go away, Officer, if you know what's good for you!'

'Don't threaten me! Open up!'

Gregorio stopped threatening him and simply fired his revolver once through the door.

The bullet grazed Landolina's head, and he turned tail and ran.

After descending the stairs and going out into the main street, he saw people fleeing in every direction amidst cries and laments, curses and prayers. From two separate balconies, Gregorio and Caterina had started firing rifles at passers-by below.

Thus began the siege of the Palmisanos' little fortress by the forces of order – that is, by Montalbano, Augello, Fazio, Gallo, and Galluzzo. The crowd of onlookers was large but kept at a distance by the municipal policemen. After an hour or so, the newspapermen and television crews also arrived.

By ten o'clock that evening, seeing that not even their priest, equipped with a megaphone, could persuade his two elderly parishioners to surrender, Montalbano came to the conclusion that they would have to storm the tiny

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stronghold. He sent Fazio out to determine how they could reach the terrace, either from the roof or a neighbouring apartment. After an hour of careful reconnaissance, Fazio returned to say that it was hopeless: there was no way to reach the roof from any of the other apartments or to approach the Palmisanos' terrace.

The inspector rang Catarella from his mobile. 'Call the Montelusa fire department at once—'

'Izz 'ere a fire, Chief?'

'Let me finish! And tell them to come here at once with a ladder that can reach the fifth floor.'

'So there's a fire onna fifth floor?'

'There isn't a fire!'

'So why's you want the fire department?' Catarella asked with implacable logic.

Cursing the saints, the inspector hung up, dialled the fire department himself, identified himself, and explained what he wanted.

'Right away?' the switchboard operator asked.

'Of course!'

'The problem is that the two vehicles with ladders are engaged. They could probably be in Vigàta in about an hour. As for the searchlight, there's no problem. I'll send the crew right away.'

Right away meant another hour wasted.

Every so often the Palmisanos would fire a few shots with their rifles and pistols, just to stay sharp. At last the

searchlight arrived, got into position, and cast its beam. The entire facade of the building was bathed in a harsh blue light.

‘Thank you, Inspector Montalbano!’ the television cameramen cried out.

It looked exactly as if they were shooting a film.

The ladder eventually arrived after one o’clock in the morning, and was promptly extended until it touched the balustrade covered by the banner.

‘All right, I’m going up,’ said Montalbano. ‘Fazio, you come up behind me. Mimì, you go inside with Gallo and Galluzzo and wait outside their door. While I’m keeping them busy on the terrace, I want you to try to force their door and get inside.’

No sooner had the inspector set his foot on the first rung than Gregorio suddenly appeared from behind the banner and fired his pistol. And disappeared. Montalbano took cover in a doorway and said to Fazio: ‘I think it’s better if I go up alone. You stay behind on the ground and start firing to give me some cover.’

As soon as Fazio fired his first shot, tearing a hole in the banner, the inspector climbed the first rung. He was gripping the ladder with only his left hand, since he had his revolver in his right.

He continued climbing cautiously. He’d reached the fourth floor when suddenly, despite Fazio’s gunfire, Gregorio Palmisano reappeared and fired a shot from his revolver that barely missed the inspector.

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Instinctively Montalbano ducked his head between his shoulders, and in so doing he caught sight of the street below. All at once a cold sweat drenched him from head to toe and he began to feel so dizzy he was in danger of falling. A surge of vomit rose from the pit of his stomach. He realized that he was in the throes of vertigo, something he'd never experienced before. And now, no doubt with the onset of old age, it suddenly appeared at the worst possible moment.

He held still for a long minute, unable to move, eyes shut tight. But then he clenched his teeth and resumed his climb, even more slowly than before.

When he reached the balustrade, he bolted upright, ready to start firing, but a quick glance revealed that the terrace was deserted. Gregorio had gone back inside, closing the French windows behind him, and must certainly be behind the shutter with his revolver pointed.

'Turn off the spotlight!' Montalbano yelled.

And he leapt onto the terrace, immediately lying flat. Gregorio's shot arrived on schedule, but the harsh light that had suddenly gone out had left him dazzled, forcing him to fire blindly. Montalbano fired back in turn, but couldn't see anything. Then little by little his eyes returned to normal.

But standing up and running towards the French windows while shooting was out of the question, since this time Gregorio was certain to hit him.

As he was wondering what to do, Fazio jumped over the balustrade and lay down beside him.

Now they heard rifle shots coming from inside.

'That's Caterina firing at our men from behind the door,' Fazio said softly.

The terrace was completely bare except for a vase of flowers and a clothesline with things hanging from it; as for anything behind which they might take cover, nothing. Leaning against a wall, however, were three or four long iron poles, possibly the remains of an old belvedere.

'What should we do?' asked Fazio.

'Run over there and grab one of those poles. If it's not rusted through, I think you should be able to burst open the French windows. Give me your gun. Ready? Here we go . . . One, two, three!'

They stood up, and Montalbano started shooting both pistols, feeling slightly ridiculous, like a sheriff in an American movie. Then he stopped up alongside Fazio, who was using the pole as a lever, still shooting, this time at the shutter. At last the French windows flew open, and they found themselves in near total darkness, because the large room they had entered was barely illuminated by the faint light of an oil lamp on a small table. It had been some time since the Palmisanos stopped using electric lights, and no doubt they no longer had power.

Where was the crazy old man hiding? They heard two rifle shots ring out in a nearby room. It was Caterina fighting off the efforts of Mimi, Gallo, and Galluzzo to break down the front door.

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'Grab her from behind,' Montalbano said to Fazio, giving him back his gun. 'I'll go and look for Gregorio.'

Fazio disappeared behind a door that gave onto a corridor.

But there was another door off the room, and it was closed. Montalbano felt certain, for no particular reason, that the old man was behind it. Tiptoeing up to it, he turned the knob, and the door opened slightly. The expected gunshot never came.

And so he flung the door wide open while jumping aside. There was no reaction.

And what was Fazio up to? Why was the old lady still firing?

He took a deep breath and went in, bent completely over, ready to shoot. And immediately he didn't know where he was.

It was a large room, densely thicketed with a sort of forest, but of what?

Then he realized what it was and felt paralysed by an irrational fear.

By the light of another oil lamp he saw dozens and dozens of crucifixes of varying size, ranging from three feet to ceiling-high, held upright by wooden bases and forming indeed a tangled forest, arranged in such a way that many faced one another, with the arm of one cross cutting across the arm of the cross beside it, while other, shorter crosses had their backs to the larger crosses but

stood face to face with other crosses of the same height, and so on.

Montalbano became immediately convinced that Gregorio was not in the room and certainly would never start firing and risk striking one of the crucifixes. All the same, he couldn't move, being frozen in fear like a child who finds himself alone in an empty church illuminated only by candlelight. At the far end of the large room was an open door, with the dim light of yet another oil lamp filtering through. The inspector eyed it but was unable to take a single step.

What finally forced him to take the plunge into the forest was a shout from Fazio amidst a horrible mouselike squeaking, which was actually the sound of Caterina's desperate cries.

'Chief! I've got her!'

Montalbano leapt forward, zigzagging between the crucifixes, crashing into one that lurched but did not fall, and then dashed through the far door. He found himself in a room with a double bed.

Gregorio pointed his revolver at him and fired as the inspector dived to the floor. Montalbano heard the firing pin click; the gun was empty. He stood up. The old man, who was tall and looked like a skeleton with shoulder-length white hair, was completely naked and staring in disbelief at the revolver still in his hand. With a swift kick, Montalbano sent the gun flying across the room.

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Gregorio started crying.

Then the inspector noticed, as a sense of horror very nearly overwhelmed him, that on one of the pillows lay the head of a woman with long blonde hair, her body covered by a sheet. He realized at once that the body was lifeless.

Approaching the bed for a better look, he heard Gregorio order him, in a voice like sandpaper: 'Don't you dare go near the bride that God sent me!'

He lifted the sheet.

It was a decrepit inflatable doll that had lost some of its hair, was missing an eye, had one deflated tit and little circles and rectangles of grey rubber scattered all over its body. Apparently whenever the doll sprang a leak from old age, Gregorio vulcanized it.

'Salvo, where are you?' It was Augello.

'I'm over here. Everything's under control.'

He heard a strange noise and looked into the next room. Gallo and Galluzzo, equipped with powerful torches, were moving crucifixes in order to create a passage. When they had finished, Montalbano saw Mimi and Fazio coming forward, flanked by two rows of crucifixes, restraining between them a struggling Caterina Palmisano, who continued to make mousey squeaking noises.

Caterina looked as if she had just stepped out of a horror novel. She was quite short and wearing a filthy

nightgown riddled with holes, had dishevelled, yellowish-white hair and big, wide-open eyes, and only one long, blood-curdling tooth in her drooling mouth.

'I curse you!' Caterina said, looking at Montalbano with wild eyes. 'You shall burn alive in the fires of Hell!'

'We can talk about that later,' the inspector replied.

'I'd call an ambulance,' Mimì suggested. 'And have them both sent to the madhouse, or whatever it's called these days.'

'We certainly can't keep them in a holding cell,' Fazio added.

'All right, call an ambulance and take them outside. Thank the firemen and send them home. Did they break the door down?'

'No, there was no need. I opened it from the inside,' said Fazio.

'And what are you going to do?' Augello asked.

'Did she have both rifles with her?' he asked Fazio instead of answering.

'Yes, sir.'

'Then there must be another gun around the house, the father's pistol. I'm going to have a look. You two go now, but leave me one of those torches.'

Left alone, Montalbano stuck his gun in his pocket and took a step.

But then he thought better of it and took the gun out again. True, there wasn't anyone around any more, but it was the place itself that made him uneasy. The torch cast

gigantic shadows of the crucifixes on the walls. Montalbano raced through the passage created by his men and found himself in the room that gave onto the terrace.

Feeling the need for a little fresh air, he went outside. And although the air stank of the smoke of the cement factory and car exhausts, it smelled to him like fine mountain air compared to what he'd been breathing inside the Palmisanos' apartment.

He went back inside and headed for the door that led to the corridor. Immediately on the left were three rooms in a row, while the wall on the right was solid.

The first room was Caterina's bedroom. On top of the chest of drawers, the bedside table, and the bookcase hundreds of little statuettes of the Madonna had been massed, each with a light in front. On the walls were another hundred or so holy pictures, all of the Blessed Virgin. Each picture had a wooden shelf under it, on which shone a light. It looked like a cemetery at night.

The door to the second room was locked, but the key was in the keyhole. The inspector turned it, opened the door, and went inside. It was completely dark. By the beam of the torch he saw an enormous room crammed full of pianos, two or three of them grand pianos, one with the cover of the keyboard open. Enormous spider's webs twinkled between one piano and the next. Then all at once a grand piano began to play. As Montalbano shouted in fear and withdrew, he heard the entire musical scale resonate, *do re mi fa sol la ti*. Were there living dead

in that accursed apartment? Ghosts? He was bathed in sweat, the gun in his hand trembling slightly, but nevertheless found the strength to raise his arm and illuminate the great room with his torch. And he finally saw the ghostly musician. It was a large rat running wildly from one piano to another. Apparently it had run across the open keyboard.

The third room was the kitchen. But it smelled so bad that the inspector didn't have the courage to go in. He would get one of his men come and look for the pistol tomorrow.

When he went back down into the street, everybody was gone. He headed for his car, which was parked near the town hall, started it up, and headed home to Marinella.

At home he had a long shower, but did not go to bed. Instead he went and sat on the veranda.

And so, instead of being awakened by the first light of day as usual, it was he who watched the day awaken.