

STRANGE STORIES AND UNSOLVED MYSTERIES

Was it or Was it Not Giuseppe?

A story by Fondas Ladis

One Saturday in October of 1928 art dealer Carl X. was recounting to a group of friends that had gathered at his home in Lausanne a strange incident that had recently happened to him.

“You may on occasion have happened to see people on the street who remind you of someone you know or you may have chanced to run into acquaintances you cannot recognise. Something of this sort is bound to happen to all of us at some time or another. I wonder if you have ever experienced what happened to me.

As you know, I have many personal ties with Italy as I lived there in self-exile during the Great War. Thus, on the occasion of a business trip to Cairo, I decided, before returning to Switzerland, to make a stop in the country where I had many dear friends. I took the steamer from Alexandria to Brindisi and from there got a train to Rome via Naples.

I had lived in the land of Dante for a total of five years, from 1916 until 1921. And there I was, returning to the place where, along with the political adventures of a time of unrest, I had also gone through a series of equally ‘restless’ youthful escapades.

I had taken with me my personal notes with names and addresses that would help find my old friends in Rome and Florence.

When I arrived at the Termini train station in the Italian capital, I hired a car and headed for a little boarding house that I knew of in a sidestreet near the Piazza del Popolo, where I was fortunate enough to find a room.

That night I preferred to keep to myself. I walked down the main avenue Via del Corso towards the Piazza Vittorio feeling both nostalgic yet full of anticipation.

The first day passed uneventfully. I made two visits: one in the morning to a lawyer friend and the other in the afternoon to a woman friend, who had been, for a

short interim, my mistress as well. She gave me a warm welcome, introduced me to her children, two pleasant boys, and a little while later her husband arrived, a particularly courteous man of 50, a public notary by profession.

The following day was to be the most important. I had telephoned one of my best friends, a civil servant at the Ministry of Finance. We arranged to meet at 12:00 noon on Sunday, in the main square where the Pantheon is. We were to meet at the fountain with the obelisk in front of the cafés and restaurants, a spot flooded with many locals and tourists.

I arrived a quarter of an hour early. I walked past the steps to the entrance to the Pantheon and approached the meeting place, hoping that my friend had also arrived early. I could not discern him through the crowd and distanced myself a bit from the place so that would be able to spot him as soon as he approached and be able to keep my emotions in check.

At 12:00 he had still not turned up. Five more minutes went by. And another five. I started observing the faces of the people that went by in little huddles as well as the faces of those who were standing in one place also waiting for someone. My gaze was arrested by a dark-skinned man, about forty years of age, with connecting eyebrows. He, too, was searching the faces of the passers-by. There was something intense about the expression on his face. His forehead, trapped between his eyes and thick hair, puzzled me.

The hour was late. I could not explain the absence of my friend, who a mere few hours ago had been so excited about my arrival and had suggested himself that we meet immediately.

Gradually an idea was born in my mind. Could it not be possible that this man, who continued to stand but a few feet away from me, was Giuseppe? It did not look at all like him. But it could, in essence, be him.

The thought was crazy, irrational, based on thin air. I thought, however, that my friend could have undergone some changes in his life that had marked him to such an extent that his facial features had become harsher. But if that were him, would he not have recognised me?

The longer I observed this unknown man, simple of dress, with his strange, somewhat rustic face, the more I called to mind the round, laughing face of my friend Giuseppe, who was shorter anyway, and the more ashamed I was of my thoughts. In

any case, I was certain that the man had seen me. Even more certain was that fact that he had not noticed me. It was almost as if I was afraid he might find me familiar and come over and talk to me. I put some distance between us and observed him through the window of a nearby bar.

‘Perhaps,’ I thought again, ‘he saw me and was also embarrassed about thinking the same thoughts I am.’ But my countenance had not altered to such a degree as to prevent one from recognising me. The most probable explanation was that this was not Giuseppe and because this man was also waiting for someone who had been delayed, he had thought along the same lines I had, that is, that I was the person he was waiting for, despite the fact that I looked nothing like him.

Another half-hour went by. Neither of us would leave. Neither me from the bar, nor him from the fountain. In the end, I did not dare to speak to him, to find out what made me think what I did. Nor could I bear to stay any longer. I left at precisely 1:00.”

The art dealer Carl X. completed his narrative as follows:

“You may well ask, ‘what happened next? Didn’t you call your friend to find out why he had failed to come to your appointment? Didn’t you get together the following day?’ Instead of answering your questions, I prefer to pose another one: Just the way we mistake a stranger for an acquaintance, is it not possible for the opposite to happen? To see someone who does not look at all like an acquaintance, but nonetheless to be that very person?”