

DAFFODIL WINE

The small department where Giovanni Abruzzi worked was well isolated from the noisy bustle of the Rome bank of which it was a part. Here he sat every working day, recording, calculating, stamping and filing away documents which no one would ever see, which no one would ever read. His job was of no interest to him whatsoever. After twenty years of faithful service as a teller in the large marble-domed room just down the hall, he had been rewarded by being entombed in this dead-letter box, at a slight increase in pay. This banishment, as with every event in his life, he accepted with not a murmur of dissent.

The businessmen and bank managers who entered the department, infrequently, would have found little to attract them to the tiny, sparrowlike figure bent over his paperwork, would have seen little in the shy brown eyes to invite them to strike up a conversation, beyond the customary questions and formalities. But had they been students of human nature rather than of high finance, they would have noticed that the brown eyes moved quickly, took in what they saw at a single glance, before returning to their tedious chores. What they never could have suspected was that the little clerk was an astute judge of human character, perhaps even a master.

For twenty years as a bank teller he had occasion to witness the daily dramas of human life. Each face that presented itself through the golden frame of his cage was unaware that it was being photographed with frightening accuracy. As he asked the customary questions, he noticed the small details which gave important clues to the characters of his clients. Sometimes he would ask them a question or even make a joke in order to confirm or deny a psychological observation he had made a moment, a day, a week, before.

Verbal statements on his part, however, were seldom necessary if he needed to elicit a response. Usually just a tilt of his head, the lift of an eyebrow, some seemingly insignificant facial expression, would summon up the most surprising tidbits of information. This was due to the simple fact that Giovanni Abruzzi, in contrast to most of the human race, knew exactly what his own face looked like to those who stood opposite him. Thousands of hours spent practicing in front of the full length mirror in his bedroom had given him the ability to call up at will a vast repertoire of specific gestures with which he could manipulate those opposite him into revealing their innermost thoughts, for he was able to read their faces and body language as easily as his own. The gift to provoke, to soothe, to rouse to laughter or to anger, was his.

As years passed he became equally adept at recreating not only the faces but also the gestures which he had viewed through his golden cage at work in his

magic mirror at home. Using the mirror as a kind of film screen, he was able to project onto it hundreds of human personality types. Suddenly an old crone, bent and worn, would appear before him, only to be replaced in an instant by a sturdy Roman bartender. Life's passing cavalcade trooped by, transplanted from the familiar setting of the bank to the somewhat unaccustomed one of a bank clerk's lonely bedroom. In short, Giovanni Abruzzi was a supreme actor, acutely frustrated, as yet undiscovered. His only dream in life was to be given the opportunity to step before the public on the movie screen, to take his place next to the reknowned actors and actresses whose routines and roles he had studied until he could reproduce them as unfailingly in his mirror as he could the characters of his bank clients.

Childhood had not been kind to Giovanni Abruzzi. His father, a military man, had inflicted considerable physical as well as psychological abuse on his only son. His mother had been powerless to protect him, taken up as she was with her own morbid, alcoholic self. The elder Abruzzi was merciless in exacting the same unflinching obedience from his son which he demanded from the men who served under him. No other goal than a career as a bank manager was allowed to the son by the father. But no amount of harsh punishment could destroy Giovanni Abruzzi's dream, a dream which was revealed to him in an epiphany of startling intensity after viewing De Sica's film *The Bicycle Thief* as a child. Perhaps it was the relationship between the father and son in the film which struck such a responsive chord in him, but from that time forth, practicing the craft of a film actor, in his own solitary bizarre manner, became his lifetime preoccupation. Being placed in a bank proved to be a salvation for him, rather than a curse, and so the dreaded father became his own tortured son's accomplice.

One event could be cited from many which reveal the dynamic between Giovanni Abruzzi and his father. About to take the final series of examinations to gain the Athaneum degree at his Lyceum, the son found himself being personally chauffeured to school by the overexpectant father. On the way, however, the passenger door swung open, depositing the scholar rather roughly in the gutter. Without a moment's hesitation, the son disregarded the call of the concerned parent, who had quickly pulled his car over to a stop, and immediately ran away, convinced that his father was about to punish him for his mistake. Only by a miracle did he manage to arrive on foot in time for the examination, battered and bruised by the fall, humiliated by his torn and dirty clothes as he entered the classroom, late, to the jeers of his fellow students.

Giovanni Abruzzi's father had only one hobby, one pastime, one passion, in which he indulged his otherwise spartan personality—the collecting of wines. In wooden racks crammed into every corner of their small home were wines of every

type, both good and bad. He was not at all a connoisseur, only a clumsy collector. Yet, strangely enough, his curious military mentality admitted only the drinking of hard liquor, in which he was joined by his unfortunate wife, with disastrous consequences for her, leaving the ever-increasing stock of wine bottles untouched and unopened. Due to the simple fact that many wines do not survive for years in an unopened bottle without turning to vinegar, we might say that a large number of his father's wines had been rendered useless by waiting too long to offer them to be drunk. In fact, in Giovanni Abruzzi's presence, a friend of his used these exact words relating to the father's unopened wines: "He waited too long." These words, it seemed, were fated to become the epitaph to the son's acting career were it not for a tiny unforeseen occurrence.

This occurrence (the ways of fate are indeed strange) took the form of a small hole, certainly not more than two inches in diameter, which appeared one day in the white protective helmet that Giovanni Abruzzi wore to work every day on his motor scooter. To his horror, while combing his hair in the employees' bathroom one day, he saw in the mirror that his face had collapsed on one side. The company doctor diagnosed the affliction as Bell's palsy, facial nerve paralysis, induced by a steady blast of cold air through the hole in his helmet. Slowly, over a period of months, the condition reversed itself. Again he was able to resume his practice, to recover from the horror of having almost lost his great talent. However, he was left with a slightly drooping left eyelid, and here again fate took a hand.

At the lowest point of his dreams, his aspirations, exiled even from his contact with his public, a writer whom he had met some years earlier at the bank approached him with the idea of taking the lead role in an amateur video he was making. The part was to be that of a psychiatrist who is madly in love with one of his patients, an unremarkable enough plot were it not for the fact that the doctor takes it on himself to solve the patient's problems by actually killing off each of the difficult figures in her life, himself. While shooting the video, the writer was astounded by the extraordinary acting abilities of the bank clerk, to the point of recasting the whole thing. Using Giovanni Abruzzi's protean talents to play any role at all, he casted an ordinary actor in the role of the psychiatrist and let the bank clerk play, in turn, each of the four intended victims. The rest is, as they say, history. The video only placed third in the competition in which it was entered, but an astute Italian film producer serving on the jury spotted Giovanni Abruzzi's genius and brought him, along with the characteristic sleepy eyelid which was to become his trademark, to the attention of the film public.

Today, April 9 1991, Giovanni Abruzzi, the man of a thousand faces, died, mourned by filmgoers around the globe. He stands as the most highly sought after comic actor in movie history. No one who has ever seen his film, *I Shot My Mother*

With Her Own Hasselblad, can ever forget his portrayal of the mother, particularly in that telling scene in which he leads a half-crazed crew of Japanese sailors a merry chase around the spires of Notre Dame. In a brief ten-year meteoric career, he rose from his humble origins to take his place with the mighty. Let this modest obituary serve as an inspiration to the struggling unrecognized geniuses of this world. As his epitaph he wished only the following lines from an American folksong:

Sweet daffodil wine,

It stays for a time.

It stays for a time -

Daffodil wine, daffodil wine.

BIG BLACK DOG

I met him on the train to Leiden. He was a big guy and his name was Rients Hoeksma. From my Dutch he knew right away that I was an American; that quickly led to his mentioning in return that he lived in a small town in the northern part of Holland. We liked each other from the start. When the train stopped he took my telephone number and promised to call me the next time he was in Amsterdam.

Sure enough, a few weeks later, Rients contacted me. We decided to meet at a little place he visited from time to time in the Jordaan. He was a bit late, so I used the time to go to work on the waitress, who was appealing in an animalistic way.

When he arrived I could see that something was wrong. He looked like a man who was being followed. Rients' open, unthinking attitude on the train had been replaced by a highly worried one. He looked haggard, as if he hadn't slept too well, either, which proved to be true. As a matter of fact, that was his biggest problem at the moment, at least as far as he was aware of it.

The waitress brought our beers and as I watched her ass disappear behind the kitchen door he started right in. For some strange reason I was the only person who could help him with his problem, although we barely knew each other. A few years earlier he had taken a bus trip to Bulgaria during which an old gipsy woman had told him that in a few years his whole life would drastically change due to a very

stressful situation. Unfortunately for me, she had also said that the only person who could help him would be a foreigner he would meet by chance on a train.

During the next hour, interrupted only by the occasional visit of our barmaid, Rients related to me the disturbing events of the previous three weeks. It seems that up until the time we met he was a successful wine merchant, happily married with two kids, deeply involved in the social life of the area in Friesland where he had grown up. Today he had quit his job. His life had become a nightmare. His wife and children were very understanding but deeply worried because of the changes taking place in him.

His principal problem was insomnia, accompanied by the most vivid dreams and flashbacks about his childhood. He related that his life had taken a turn for the worse since the death of his father three years before, which had been followed just recently by the protracted illness and subsequent death of his favorite brother, Romke. Since that time he was called on the phone almost every day by his brother's mistress, who seemed unable to make it emotionally without Rients. Romke's wife and children had also partially become his financial responsibility, although this was not the worst of his difficulties, due to his brother's wise investments as well as his own success in the international wine trade.

Rients spoke to me like I was his shrink or confessor. He said that he knew that I was the only one who could help him. What he couldn't have known was that I actually was trained as a psychiatrist. I told him that I would try to help but needed to have more information.

First off, I needed to know more about these dreams, more about his childhood. He was starting in on his third beer, sweating and loosening his tie, his huge hands flopping over each other in suppressed frustration as he told his story.

It seems that his father had been the town butcher, also supplying meat to outlying villages in that remote area in the north of Holland. Rients' job was not only to help his father and brother with the slaughtering, always done on Tuesday, but also with the delivery of the meat. For this purpose his father had rigged up a metal box for him on the handlebars of his bike. This way he could pedal out into the countryside to make deliveries for the weekend. His only problem lay with one client in particular—a client who kept a particularly vicious big black dog.

Rients was terrified of the dog. Every time he would approach the house, the animal would come running up to him, attracted by the odor of the meat, snarling and salivating.

The owner would invariably call the dog off, but that never helped Rients through those initial moments of panic when the beast approached him. His father had suggested bringing some bones along to throw to the dog, a ploy which only succeeded in making the animal more interested in the meat on the bicycle.

Whenever Rients mentioned his father he could not conceal the enormous love and respect that he felt for him. Although he never got along that well with his brothers and sisters, and found it hard to relate to his mother who had developed incipient Alzheimer's disease, his relationship with his father and his brother Romke was rock-solid.

I had the feeling that Rients could have talked all night but I needed to get home for dinner, so we made an appointment for the following Friday, same time same place.

I looked forward to our next meeting, not only because I was intrigued by the intrusion of this interesting episode into my rather orderly, predictable life but also because of the element of seduction introduced by our little waitress.

The next time we met, he spoke a bit more about the childhood fantasies, about the memories that came flooding back to him late at night, overwhelming him in the wake of their irresistible surging power.

He told me of a time when he and two friends went to a youth club in a larger nearby city. They obviously looked like country bumpkins in their old-fashioned clothing. After a few laughs and comments were directed at them, Rients had doubled up his huge fists and in slow measured tones informed the city lads that if any harm should come to his two friends he would kill their tormentors. According to Rients it was his size and the big knife which he carried at his belt which frightened the hecklers into backing off. I got the idea that it was more the serious tone he must have said it in; more the wild, suppressed violence that they sensed in him. I also suspected that Rients was unaware of the enormous anger which he had stuffed down deep inside himself over the years.

During this session he also told me about his memories of slaughtering the animals, and about the father's shooting of his favorite horse, due to a broken leg that would not mend. When I pointed out that he had not been given enjoyable tasks by his father, only unpleasant ones like delivering the meat on the bicycle, he quickly changed the subject.

Our third and last meeting two weeks later was dominated by his account of a particularly vivid dream which he had just a few days before. Meeting Rients was an experience I enjoyed, but in an odd way the two of us and the little dark-haired waitress at the cafe had become a trio, although neither of us ever said much to her. On her part, she just delivered the drinks but always in the same coquettish manner that intrigued me. Rients barely ever acknowledged her presence.

The dream centered around the ferocious dog who periodically confronted him as he road up with the meat on his bicycle. In the dream he was sitting at a large dining table covered splendidly with a damask tablecloth, silver, plates and

crystal goblets. At the opposite end of the table sat the big black dog with a linen napkin tied around his neck and a knife and fork in either hand. The meal as Rients described it proceeded in silence. He reported feeling no fear of the animal. At a certain point the dog poured a large cup of wine and pushed it over toward Rients for him to drink. He felt gratitude toward the dog for this act but when he looked down at the cup which he was about to empty he saw instead his own father's skull filled not with wine, but with blood. He woke up in a panic, left his bed, went downstairs to the den in the basement and underwent yet another ordeal of psychological torture for several hours.

I slowly began to point out to him that three things were immediately apparent. First of all he was punishing himself for something. Second, the dog was one of the central symbol of his unconscious life. Third, that he desperately wanted to make friends with the creature, whose nature was not that different from his own masculine self. Rients listened with great interest, the sweat standing out on his brow.

I proceeded to tell him about a book I had read once by a psychologist who believed that at the center of all of us is a shadow personality—that this shadow represents what we have been taught is evil, the part of us which must be hidden at all costs. The more we try to suppress this shadow in us or to ignore it, the more it begins to break out in the form of violent thoughts and actions. According to the psychologist, it simply will not be denied. Even further, it often represents the most vital and powerful part of us.

He then spoke freely about his Calvinist background, about the church in the North and what he had been taught as a child. Certain realizations were beginning to dawn on him.

The tremendous significance of the dream was that Rients had begun to realize that he needed to go back into this remembered childhood that had become more real to him than his daily life, to descend into the pit, and to confront the central symbol of his terror, to make friends with it and ultimately to acknowledge and embrace it. That he was on the verge of beginning to deal with his true feelings for his father and older brother was clear to me, but it was more than that. Rients had reached a perilous coast within himself, on the rocks of which his entire personality might be dashed.

He left first, filled with his own thoughts. The waitress and I spoke for the first time at some length. I discovered that she had come to Holland from Bulgaria. Her name was Irina. A week later I got a phone call from Rients. He sounded pretty

excited and told me that he had made a major breakthrough. We made an appointment for the following Friday.

I arrived at the cafe a bit late and was surprised to find that he had not yet arrived. It was extremely busy that afternoon. Finally, Irina managed to make her way over to me.

"Are you waiting for your friend today?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"I'm afraid he isn't coming."

She stopped for a moment. Behind her in the mirror she could see the owner giving her a quick glance.

"I can't talk more now. Can you meet me after my shift is over? I'll be done at nine o'clock."

Filled with foreboding I killed time wandering around the maze of small streets and canals. My mind was racing with questions. Why was Irina showing interest in me? What had happened to Rients? Above all, how did she know about it? On the stroke of nine I returned to the bar.

A few minutes later she joined me, looking very different in her street clothes. We walked together for quite a while in silence before I asked if she wanted to get a drink. She had a quiet place in mind where we could talk.

We took a table in the back. She ordered a glass of red wine and I a malt whiskey. Now that I had a chance to observe her more closely I was impressed by her quiet manner and her strange sort of beauty. She was not at all conventionally good-looking, but intriguing just the same.

Finally she broke the silence.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news for you," she began.

I knew at once what had happened. I held my breath.

"He's dead."

"Did he kill himself?"

"They think so."

I finished my whiskey and ordered another one while she continued to sip on her wine.

"When I heard, I was in a state of shock."

She paused.

"I had first met him when he was on one of his Bulgarian wine trips. He helped me get out."

Thoughtfully, she drained the glass and I ordered her another. She didn't object.

"My first impulse was to go to the funeral, I don't know why. I hate funerals. But I thought it better to leave that to his family. I would have been so out of place. Not that I really cared, though. I would have my time alone with him later. So I took a train up there the next day, then a bus to his village and walked to the graveyard. It wasn't too difficult to find his fresh-dug grave. By the time I got there it looked like it was about to rain. There was nobody there but me. Me and a dog."

She paused. I wanted to ask questions about her relationship with Rients. Wanted to find out all kinds of details about his life which she alone could tell me. Well, there would be enough time for that later. I kept silent as she continued.

"I put some flowers on the grave next to bunches already starting to wither. I didn't cry. I just stayed for a few minutes and then left."

She abruptly emptied her glass.

"I've got to go," she said.

I began to get up as she rose, but quickly she motioned to me not to follow her. As she passed my chair I took her arm. She pulled away lightly but half-turned to look at me.

"Thanks for the drinks."

"The dog."

"The dog?" she asked.

"The one you saw at the graveyard."

"Oh, him. Nothing special. Just a big black dog."