

The Jew of Verona

Antonio Bresciani

THE JEW OF VERONA

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Intermediate English

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Antonio Bresciani

He was born in 1798 in Ala (Trento) from a noble family. In 1814, he moved to Verona and attended the St Sebastian College. Following the completion of his studies there, in 1818 he joined the Seminary of Verona, where he studied theology. Some years later, in 1821, he was ordained in Bressanone. Once ordained, he travelled to Rome with the intention of entering the Society of Jesus. He was admitted to the novitiate of St Andrew. In 1828, he made his religious vows as a Jesuit in the house of novitiate in Chieri. Then he was sent to Genoa to the Jerome's Academy. Between 1834 and 1848 as rector, he moved from one college to another around Italy: in 1834 at the Carmine College in Turin, in 1837 at the College of St Bartholomew in Modena and in 1846 he became rector of *Propaganda Fidei* in Rome.

On 9 January 1850, he was invited to Naples to take part in the first meeting of the editorial board of the review 'Civiltà Cattolica'. His task was to write novels. He entertained his readers with historical novels: *The Jew of Verona* (1851), *Roman Republic and Lionel* (1855), *Ubaldo and Irene* (1855), *Lorenzo or conscripted* (1856), and many others. He died in Rome in 1862.

His whole work in seventeen volumes has been curated in 1869 by 'Civiltà Cattolica'.

His writing is an exaltation of Christian universalism and Roman pontificate. He thoroughly gets in the debate of the Risorgimento values. He recognises the need of an united, democratic nation, free from foreign authorities. His hard dispute with Mazzini and the secret societies deals with a central point: though it is true 'to give God what is of God, and Caesar what is of Caesar,' for Bresciani the millenarian Christian values must firmly remain deep-rooted in the democratic process of self-determination of a nation, and the church, though with its criticizable defects, is the supporting column. The marked anti-clericalism of Mazzini and the secret societies has brought Bresciani to fight them fully, without seeing, or at least minimizing, their positive and determining contribution to the success of Italian Risorgimento.

I – Bartolo Capegli

From the town of Portici and Torre del Greco you can admire the Vesuvius. Pope Pius IX, in spite of the bitterness of his exile¹, enjoyed that panorama from the royal palace at Portici. He gazed at the beauty of those slopes, the sea, the clear sky, the abundance of fruit, the mild climate. He used to describe it as a blessed land.

On the sixth of February 1850, the Vesuvius woke up again. For three consecutive days, there was an eruption of lava and fumes. The sky grew dark, the sun turned pale, the animals were unsettled², people kept away, others from far off remarked on the fury of nature. Among these was Bartolo Capegli from Rome, who was about forty, handsome, clever and friendly. He had come to Naples from Switzerland. Now he inwardly thought: 'Who on earth doesn't see the fate of Italy through the eruption of Mount Vesuvius! This beautiful, generous country invites everyone to enjoy the peacefulness of its cities, the ardour of its youth, the gayety of its women, the industry and warm-heartedness of its citizens. This country has been suddenly ravaged³ like after a volcano's eruption, flooding the land with ashes, flames and ruins. Now I

¹ In November 1848, Pius IX took shelter in Gaeta, in the Kingdom of Naples, after the uprising in Rome. From September 1849 to April 1850, he stayed in the royal palace at Portici.

² Unsettled: not calm.

³ To ravage: to damage, to devastate.

see my beloved country flawed⁴ of its beauty and mocked⁵!

His father, Leonard, was a lawyer involved in the trials of the Sacred Roman Rota. When Bartolo was a child, his father brought him to mass in the church of the Madonna of St Augustine, and to the pope's functions. Concistorial lawyers, judges of the Rota, consultants of the Holy Office, prelates met at Capegli's. As a child, Bartolo heard them praising a previous pope, Pius VII⁶. They described him as the most dignified pope ever: majestic, mighty, awe-inspiring⁷, with a remarkable and sonorous voice. They said that it was tragic for Rome when in 1809 the French seized and brought Pius VII to France. Many clergymen were imprisoned. An old member of the Holy Office remembered: 'It was sad to see Rome without pope: there were no more foreigners, neither art, nor trade; grass grew in the Square of Spain. All the cardinals' families were out of work; deans, gentlemen of cowl, footmen, grooms, coachmen were all without bread. Actually English, German, French, Russian and other sovereigns brought gold and silver, when they came to the seven hills of Rome to visit the pope'.

With such bells tolling his ears, Bartolo grew "like a pope". The same position was reasserted during his school years at the Roman College under the education of priests.

⁴ Flawed: damaged, spoiled.

⁵ To mock: to laugh at sb/sth in an unkind way.

⁶ Pius VII (1800-1823) was exiled by Napoleon in Avignon from 1809 to 1814.

⁷ Awe: feelings of respect and slight fear.

He loved sports. He was a keen football player and also liked riding. Usually he rode near villa Borghese, wearing a white hat, a silky vermilion tie, a green uniform with golden buttons embossed with heads of deers, wild boars, bears, and polish boots. Girls were fascinated by his look and his riding. Among them was Flavia, daughter of a wealthy Roman building contractor. Later they were to be married.

II – Alisa and Polissena

At the beginning of May 1846, Alisa, a pretty rosy maiden of fifteen, was waiting as usual for her father at the end of her school day. Her father was Bartolo. He was now a widower as his wife Flavia had died in childbirth with their second offspring⁸ three years earlier, only to be then followed by the death of their new born male child.

Alisa grew up in the seminary of St Dionisio. She was hearty, clever, with a lively imagination.

Bartolo, as a widower, led a sober life, and socialising with a circle of friends interested in politics. They argued that Pope Gregory XVI was old, but careful about the government of the church. He was considered a patron of art and science, though he was not very keen on modernisation. The uprisings in Romagna had caused debts. To smooth them out⁹, they pointed out the necessity to establish an Italic Confederation including the State of the Church, as Gioberti asserted in his *Primacy*, to create a united and

⁸ Offspring: child.

⁹ To smooth out: to remove.

strong nation with Rome as a capital. Indeed, they commented, it was required a young pope with Napoleon's heart to be the leader of the nation.

Bartolo agreed with his friends. He was a supporter of the Risorgimento. Though he was against the secret societies, he was unwittingly friends of many sectarians. He owned a cottage at Albano, out of Rome. In the spring 1846, he had engaged a lady companion to stay with Alisa. Her name was Polissena. She was twenty-eight. She had been a dancer with important theatrical companies until the age of twenty, when she stopped for unclear reasons. She travelled around many Italian cities, earning her living by curing serious illnesses through homeopathy and magnetism. For love of her country, she became a supporter of Young Italy, and was able to deliver secret messages without being discovered. Bartolo was unknowing to this. He trusted in that woman for her kind-heartedness, politeness and reliability showed during the first walks the three had in Albano. After the first two weeks spent there, Alisa begged Polissena to take her to an old Jesuit in the church of Our Lady of Galloro, on recommendation of the nuns of St Dionisio, for a confession.

'A confession by a Jesuit?' Polissena demurred¹⁰, puzzled.

'Don't you know that Jesuits are the worst enemies of virtues. Using a fine art they bewitch¹¹ the youth, dampen¹² their liveliness, turn every flame of their most tender affections off. If you fall in their hands, farewell to every human love. They will convince you to

¹⁰ To demur: to object.

¹¹ To bewitch: to enchant.

¹² To dampen: to make sth such as a feeling or a reaction less strong.

fall out of love with your father. Your sins would be told to the general of the order, who every Saturday would ponder over the list of sins of all the girls. When a young man wants to get married, he asks in confidence to the general for the list. Jesuits are old foxes, crafty, cruel people under a hypocritical skin of pity’.

From then on, Alisa had not mentioned the Jesuits in her presence any more.



She had taken from the seminary some books like *Eternal Sayings* and *The glory of Mary* by Alfonso Maria de Liguori and other books of devotion. One by one they had disappeared. In their place Polissena had put *Mark Visconti* by Tommaso Grossi, *The Piagnoni* by Massimo D’Azeglio, *Margherita Pusterla* by Cesare Cantù, telling her that in those readings she would

have worked out her human virtues and her love for the nation. According to her, who did not feel Italian blood flow in his vein, was not worthy of breathing that healthy air that gave life to their country.

The two women read the books mostly in the mornings, in the shade of the Turkey oaks along the Albano lake. There many painters portrayed the lake, the lush¹³ green vegetation around it and the Roman hills in the background.

III – The Portrait

In October the two women visited the painting exposition at the Academy of St Luke. Alisa was fond of pictures and admired each of them on show. Polissena, instead, with an odd air entertained aside two young painters; they seemed to be reasoning about something other than painting. A picture portraying the Albano lake piqued Alisa's curiosity¹⁴. In the shade of the Turkey oaks, a country girl was sitting on a rock and a bird on her knee was lovely gazing at her, the girl was putting on its head a ring of narcissi. Alisa stared at the painting. She recognised her image in that girl. The more she stared at her, the more she looked like her. She was astonished. 'Who on earth can have portrayed me? Can it be a young boy, who loves me?' She wondered. Under the picture was the signature: Aser. For the following days, she could not but think of that name.

¹³ Lush: luxuriant.

¹⁴ To pique sb's interest, curiosity: to make sb very interested in sth.