

The jeweller of Padua

Catherine Legeay

English version by Edward Freeman

Viale San Fermo.

That was where Sandro had arranged to meet her: in front of Callegari and Sons, Jewellers, at the corner of the Via Caterino Davila. He had planned everything for the rest of that day, a Saturday. They would go and have lunch somewhere in town, and then he would take her on his round of visits, probably as far as Albano.

Elsa stood in the pedestrianized street and looked through the immense windows of the jewellers shop at the busy scene within. A young man in white shirt and silk tie was carefully opening illuminated display cases by means of small gold keys on interwoven red thread. Elsa didn't dare look at the window display. The jewellery must be very expensive if one were to judge by the customers going in and out. The latest to come out were young, reminding her of those models one saw in the pages of luxury magazines. The youngest of the men sported a little diamond in his ear.

"Why me?" she wondered. He'd been courting her for months, never missing a chance to pop in to her office where she was PA to the Director of Pierdozzo & Co, ships' brokers at Porto Marghera. Sandro was one of the liveliest of the reps, clearly the outstanding member of his team and destined for promotion sometime soon to the post of Head of Sales. The boss had entrusted him with the extra task of inspecting the hotels that he was in the process of buying up to be the nucleus of a chain of luxury hotels in Northern Italy. "Nave Bianca" – White Ship – would compete with American chains which were good at providing tourists with comfort of the highest standard but lacked that essence of Italian soul with which Pierdozzo, time-honoured brokers of the port and region, were intimately acquainted.

Sandro had invited her to go with him on his weekend tour of inspection. But before they set off, over lunch at the Trattoria Busini, he had set out his cards on the table. With her heart beating yet again just at the thought of it all, Elsa remembered the way he had turned to face her, looking straight into her eyes, and then finally taking her hand discreetly at the corner of the table: he wanted to spend the weekend with her, get to know her better, show her the Palladian Villa Zileri... She had just parted company with Lorenzo and her emotional life had been a hazy mess that she had finally come to terms with. To go from there to accepting the invitation of Sandro, the heartthrob of the Pierdozzo Company, was another matter... What swung it in the end was that she could just let herself feel flattered without having to walk the love-affair tight-rope or believe for one second in the sincerity of the gentleman's honeyed words. Being seduced for a few hours was always better than spending the weekend having an expensive facial or hair-do or watching a sporting event or science-fiction series on television. And all the while wondering when Melissa was going to ring her up to go with her to the trattoria Livia of Portogruare. As for his reasons... He was beginning to provoke jealousy on the professional front and needed her help in getting inside information. He was perhaps even divorcing...

But nothing had gone the way she thought it would. He had picked her up at her place in a hired car. He had booked two rooms, in separate hotels. He was in the Padua Nave Bianca, and she was in the Leonardo da Vinci, a lower category hotel. "We must not be seen together" was how he had put it. And it was in this hotel that he joined her after the dinner they had had in a mountain inn in San Paolo del Piave.

Her memory of this dinner mingled with that of her lunch the previous day in Mestre: together they formed a kind of shadowy net with light coming through in places. The red wine had been rough, and her migraine at four o'clock in the morning spoiled her return to consciousness after alternating clouds of sleep had blotted out the hot sunny sensations of their intimate embraces. Heavy rainfall towards six o'clock woke them up for good. He was off by seven o'clock, back to his booked hotel. And he left her with an agreement to meet at 11.30 in front of Callegari the Jewellers, Via San Fermo. A strange choice indeed... Why not the Caffè Pedrocchi or the Cavour? She would at least have been able to wait under shelter. It was embarrassing to have to stand and wait in front of a shop where customers arrived by taxi or on foot, quite certain for their part that they intended to go in and pushing open the gleaming handles without a moment's hesitation. A woman of indeterminate age and aristocratic bearing waited for her male companion to push open the door. Elsa paused for a long time as she glimpsed their silhouettes through the windows: they were like delicate marionettes making slow and deliberate movements, punctuated by silent smiles and bursts of laughter. A shop assistant came up to the window on Elsa's side and took out several display cases for them: an emerald ring, a sapphire pendant, and another ring with a cultured pearl whose fine orient gleam reflected from off the clear silk material of the padded display case.

"When they come out, I'm off too", Elsa told herself. She was irritated and tired of waiting, constantly looking at her watch and wondering when he was ever going to arrive. He would of course have the perfect appearance to go into the shop, proudly wearing his Lanificerie di Prato cashmere suit that he had boasted to her about the day before and was calculated to make the very most of his elegant figure. She felt very ordinary in her little Paolo Mori dress, very stylish but austere. It was fortunate that she was wearing high heels having at the last minute changed out of her comfortable golden canvass shoes. So there she was, perched five centimetres higher and feeling increasingly ridiculous: in the Callegari shop they must by now be aware of this girl stuck in front of the window and not having the nerve to go in. She thought about moving out of sight to the other side of the street but then her interest was aroused when another couple went in and the whole shop circus performance started up again. They were a young couple, the same age as Lorenzo and herself; Elsa felt a twinge in her heart when she saw the radiant smile on the young woman's face. It was obvious that they were engaged and in the process of choosing their diamond ring – an employee was fetching one from the window at that very moment... The need to counter the boredom got the better of her; she planted herself firmly in front of the window and studied the display right in front of her eyes.

The jewels fascinated her and the boredom of waiting was soon forgotten. Callegari and Sons were clearly specialists in gemstones. They had the usual jewellers' range of diamonds, emeralds and rubies, a few amethysts and high quality aquamarines. But in the right-hand corner of the display shelf shone less common

colours: the whitish veined mother-of-pearl gleam of opal, wine-pink of rhodochrosite, celadon green of chrysoprase, fiery orange of speckled amber, gold-flecked blue of lapis-lazuli, watery crimson of ametrine, mossy green of malachite. And in fact at that moment an assistant took possession of the chrysoprase which had an oblong shape at the centre of which shone three tiny diamonds. What happy woman was going to walk out of Callegari's with that ring on her finger? Whether she be fiancée, wife, mistress or mother, she would have in front of her eyes every day this flash of colour fallen from the skies which would reflect the mood of the day, sunny or rainy, without in any way being affected. In due course it would be passed on to a daughter or grand-daughter, niece or sister... Elsa remembered the rather ordinary little ring that Lorenzo had given her the year before: she no longer wore it. But a ring like those in front of her eyes – they were not the sort to be left to be forgotten at the back of a drawer as if their lustre could dwindle as easily as the love they had once represented.

She took a few steps back, and her reverie was over. The young couple seemed to be in the process of paying. "I'm going, and too bad about him", Elsa thought. Sandro was messing her about just a bit too much. She was going to leave Padua and return home. Would there be a train? The older couple came out just at that moment. Elsa supposed they had bought the chrysoprase as it was no longer on display in the window. The elegant woman was spinning the little gold string of the white "Callegari" bag, all the while smiling and miming a kiss to the man at her side. Then the Callegari bag disappeared inside her handbag and they set off hand in hand towards the Via San Fermo. Elsa immediately followed, almost relieved to be absorbed into their happiness. It was at this moment that Sandro rushed up, coming in the opposite direction.

- I'm so sorry! It all dragged on far too long and as we were in a hotel basement I had no network and couldn't phone you...

His charm and assurance came into action once again and Elsa felt mortified at having had doubts about him. He came up and planted a kiss at the base of her neck. Warm enough but not the kiss of a lover. More a weak signal of recognition between two people who had spent the night together. Was Sandro going to hang a Callegari pendant round the neck that was leaning towards him? She hadn't had time to study the pendants in the other window.

- Right, I'm going to make up for it. Let's go!

Callegari and Sons half closed their curtains, and long cross-pieces faded by rain came down gently to the pavement. The Company's coat of arms in brick red and gold could just be made out. On the ancient clock that had pride of place above the window, Elsa saw that it was one o'clock. When would they reopen? She felt hungry and Sandro immediately had the answer.

- Right, off we go. A quick bite of lunch... "Before the Jewellers reopen" thought Elsa.

- Then we whizz off to Albano. I've booked us in for two places in the Spa Hotel! Wait till you see it! Much better than last night.

He took her arm and they set off along the Via San Fermo.

- Have you seen this shop? He said as they passed the lowered curtain.

They could make out the Callegari coat of arms: the oriental shield of Herculanium with its slim-winged lion in a nimbus of gold of another age. They've been there since the 19th century. Before they moved off he could just make out:

- 1887!

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