

Simonetta da Ravenna

Text: Elmar Vogt, Nürnberg Artwork: Fiona Messer, Ahrensburg

English Fine Tuning:
Vicki-Marie Petrick, Paris *

July 19, 2003

Dedicated to Mistress Caitrin O'Sullivan of Killarney Lake, inspiration to so many good stories.



Like all good stories, this one is also true – almost.

After we had been strolling through the Germanic National Museum in Nuremberg for several hours, Vicki-Marie and I had found rest in one of the museum's courtyards, where we sat down on a bench in the shade of a willow, which ever so softly fanned us with a light breeze in this beautiful summer's afternoon, and cooled our faces, which had admired the works of Veit Stoß and

*Story and artwork are under copyright ©2003 by Elmar Vogt, Nürnberg, and Fiona Messer, Ahrensburg, resp. Permission is granted to redistribute this document for non-commercial purposes, as long as this message is retained, and no alterations to the document are made. + Contact the author/artist through info@beamends.de. + Liked this story? There is more to come! Check out the project website www.beamends.de for new publications. + Elmar Vogt uses the free typesetting system \LaTeX 2 ϵ , and edits the sources with the Boxer text editor, both of which are highly recommended.

Albrecht Dürer, the gobelins and the sculptures for the better part of the day, until we couldn't help but laugh out loud when we discovered in the background of a fifteenth's century panel of the Lord's crucifixion none less than Jean-Luc Picard's double.

We had decided it was time for a break, and in the willow's shade, under the casual glances of a janitor, we let our conversation stray from topic to topic, like a wanderer roams from forest to garden to clearing, and we did so with idly half-closed eyes.

At one point, Vicki-Marie asked me if I had noted the pearl-adorned rose embroidery on the wonderful linen dress she was wearing, forcing me to open my eyes fully again.

"Why, sure I did", I replied.

"And did you notice, that the cloth underneath had been torn, and that the embroidery was meant to hide the rip?" she proceeded, and again I nodded.

"Of course", I said, and I'm afraid the tone of my answer compared to that of her question, as strutting compares to strolling.

"Aha", she continued, and I had the first inkling, from the playfulness of her *A-Ha*, that the cat was willing to toy. "And, pray, can you tell me how the tear came to happen, as well?"

"Sure I do", I replied, and entangled myself – both a most willing and most prone victim – in the ball of yarn the cat wanted to play with. And this is how the story of Simonetta da Ravenna came to be about.



"I am gone, Sir,
 And anon, Sir,
 I'll be with you again,
 In a trice,
 Like to the old vice,
 Your need to sustain."

W. Shakespeare: "Twelfth Night", IV.2

His Grace, Bishop Hilario was a man of fairly bad manners. But young lad Andrea was aware that he owed the fact that he had a roof over his head, and clean clothes to wear, and regular meals on the table, at least in part to the Bishop's bad manners, and so he never tired to take them with a most light-hearted spirit. Andrea laughed neither too loudly nor too shyly about His Grace's slightly worn jokes (being well aware that they were less worn than his own clothes would be without the Bishop). He conceals any *fauxpas* on Hilario's part with one that was a bit more embarrassing from himself, and otherwise bore the whims of the aging head of the Catholic church of Verona.

The streets of Verona were crowded in these decades, as the renaissance was in full bloom in Italy. Waking up after the long winter of the middle ages, the blanket

of dogmatic snow had finally been broken up, and man's soul, reminded of its roots in Rome, Sparta and Athens, brought forth geniuses and ideas again, artists and engineers, that budded like almond blossoms on the tree of civilization.

The streets were crowded with wealthy merchants and stately patricians rubbing shoulders with the dignified clergy. Piazzas brimmed with bustling craftsmen and workers. The reserved lords of Venice every now and then hampered the flow. They currently held rule over Verona, and constantly kept their noses slightly higher than the others. And especially higher than the gayly clad young gentles of Verona's own, quick with their tongues, and quick to give their jokes a good point with their rapiers, too.

And then there were those quarters, where the colours were less gay, where the stream of life flowed more turbidly, where the dull and rainy days of fall lasted endlessly. Here were no splendid feasts in the evening dusk with blazing fires and torches and laughter nor music to drive away the haze of hunger or to dry the damp and torn clothes its dwellers wore.

It was these quarters where Andrea grew up, an orphan whose origin had been swept away by the dirty river of the lower quarters, but whom God nonetheless seemed to hold in favour. Despite the years when he begged as a child, laboured in the treadmills of the manufactories as a youngster, and sometimes stole cheese and olives from the tables of those better off than he, never had Andrea suffered from the diseases that deformed so many of his fellows, his brothers and sisters of the fatherless family, or even killed them. He had retained a bright, friendly face, dark brown eyes which never seemed to lose their lustre, and a body full of the vigour and strength of youth, as now he approached his eighteenth birthday. Likewise, he was of a quick and astute mind, like a swallow always on its wing to catch a witty phrase or deliver a good line while they were hanging in the air. His mind was strong enough for the tasks of the day, his soul was sensitive enough to take care of the tremblings and falterings of another person's spirit, and his heart was there to keep both of them together.

And God offered Andrea another favour through His Grace. (How the two of them met, how it came to pass that Bishop Hilario took a liking for the young lad and felt that he could trust him, is a different story.) Suffice it to say, he decided one day to make Andrea one of his secretaries of course not *his* secretary, but one of them. As Hilario noted that in a remote corner of his heart a slight distrust of a soul as restless as Andrea's, he put into the bargain a noviciate with the Franciscan monks for him, hoping that God would now have his own interest in the lad's good behaviour.

This was the reason why Bishop Hilario shared many an evening with novice Andrea – one day hopefully *frater Andrea* – in his office in the topmost story of his palazzo, overlooking the big park with the peach orchard, when the last hues of the sunset faded to make way for the ink-blue night sky. Its needlepoints of bright stars shone with the colour of the hottest part of a flame. In the park, some lanterns would be lit, and outside life in Verona's streets took on a less assiduous, less industrious, and more sensual stride.

The Bishop enjoyed quite often in these evenings a plate of *pasta alla puttanesca*, a certain dish of noodles. (Since by the way 'puttanesca' in Italian means 'prostitute', within the walls of the Palazzo this dish would be known under the as unambiguous, yet less offensive name of *pasta Maria Magdalena*.) The pasta was quite to the Bishop's liking: His teeth were no longer a match in these days to the still

considerable sharpness and rigour of his wits, but he still could effortlessly rout a plateful of Maria Magdalena's best, and this is where Hilario's bad manners and Andrea came into play.

The pasta of course came with a large amount of delightful sauce, bright red as the sun in its most intense moments of the evening. The Bishop of course had a large amount of documents to handle, letters, scrolls, bills, et cetera, and his bad table manners brought about involuntary but regular squirted dashes of sauce across the parchments he studied. So bad was this habit of his, that indeed word about it had already spread in Verona and its surroundings. And so the tiny red stains, spread in a random yet always tasteful pattern across the pages, were at last considered to be something like the Bishop's informal signature. They were of course no replacement for a regular seal, which had to be added by the Bishop's Chamberlain later, and of course they could not remain on any document which was to be sent to other important members of the clergy, of the nobility or even the wealthier merchants. Thus, Andrea always had a stack of parchments in front of him, and it was his task to clean these parchments carefully of the puttanesca, or rather: the Maria Magdalena stains.

Now, amidst the huge amount of manuscripts brought before the Bishop's eye, there certainly were a certain amount with which His Grace did not want to bother with at all, much less read while eating. These were petitions, complaints, invitations to faraway places, and – since one does not press a Bishop for payment – friendly letters pointing out that perhaps there might be a flaw in the bookkeeping process of the Bishop's household. Since it would be rude though to leave this documents completely unanswered, Andrea received them in the shape of a second stack, and here it was his job to put stains on the parchments before they were sent back, so the addressees would at least get the satisfaction of finding that their letters had been read, and had been given due attention, though the money might still be far away.

At one point in the past, the Bishop had been busy with a good bottle of *Malvasia* wine in the later hours of the evening, because it helped so well against the melancholy which comes with old age. Despite his ambitions, Andrea had wearied a little of His Grace's droning, and consequently confused the two stacks, creating quite a stir amidst Verona's clergy and nobility. But in this summer, the incident was forgotten, and when the novice in his habit of a future monk, which never seemed quite to fit, would look up from time to time between some pasta with sauce, he was allowed to nibble, and a letter of the Duchesse of Chiara, gazing through the window onto the peach trees in the park, he certainly did not expect to see anything remarkable.



To anyone who has the opportunity, it is highly recommended to visit the river Etsch, and follow its path. The best season to do so is late spring, in the time between Easter and Whitsuntide. During summer, the river is fairly dry and muddy, in winter it is frozen and brings down with itself lots of sharp-edged ice under which it is often packed, and comes to what looks like a complete halt. The melting snow in early spring on the other hand makes it a ruffian, a wild and raging stream, stepping over its boundaries, and flooding large parts of the countryside it crosses with its dirty waters full of sand and pebbles and clay, brought down all the way from the mighty Dolomite glaciers, cracking and moaning and rumbling with moving and breaking and collapsing waves of ice, grinding their teeth on their solid granite mountain beds, to the Northern Italian plains of the river Po.

But when the melting has subsided, its waters are crystal clear, reflecting the deep blue skies of the high alps, and bringing their unfathomable depth with it. Over rapids and waterfalls jigs and skips the Etsch, squeezing itself elegantly, without slowing down at all, like a cat through narrow clefts in the rock walls, only to jump down boldly dozens and dozens of meters into some chasm, recollecting itself in a small pond, looking for the next mountain feature to frolic over.

Yet even a river may become mature. Once it leaves Tyrolia, flowing out of the last spurs of the Dolomites and into the Po plains like a youngster whose time has come to leave the grange of his parents and try his luck in a strange and alien and mad world beyond. The Etsch becomes quieter. It also changes its name, now called *Adige* by the Italians, a more solemn and adult name. Likewise, the *Adige* now behaves better, taking its time and slowing down its flow to admire a forest, or some small town built at its banks. Then it will allow the peasants to fetch large quantities of its sweet, and oh so pure water, which despite its pureness seems to bring with it the aroma of the highest mountain peaks, It may rest too in a lake and become a peaceful dwelling for the fish and other creatures which never heard of

the more wild and turbulent life the Adige has led in the Dolomites. Finally, on its way towards the Adriatic Sea, it meets the walls of the city of Verona, well respecting the works of Man, that other forces of nature hold in low esteem only too often. But the Adige had no inclination to harm anyone, and never tried to tear down the swiftly swung bridges crossing it, so it just ran through the city in these late days of spring, slightly tickled by the washing women which slammed their laundry on rocks at its banks, only mildly annoyed by the amount of faeces and dirt poured into it by the inhabitants, and quite content when some boat or other vessel crossed its surface.

From a well, also fed by the Incessant stream of the Adige, two servants fetched bucket after bucket of water on a mild and peaceful morning in the days between Easter and Whitsuntide, poured the water into basket *fiasko* bottles, and carried it up to the kitchen of the Palazzo. Some of the water was then decanted into an elegant carafe of deep purple Venetian glass. Along with two pewter goblets, the carafe was put on a silver tablet, a tasteful work which depicted in niello etchings the story of Hercules, and one of the servants carried it up the several stairs into the study of His Grace, Bishop Hilario. Here, the servant served the Bishop water, then filled the second goblet and handed it to the most extraordinary visitor who had ever asked to see His Grace, and was now with him, and who had given her name to the guards at the doors as Simonetta da Ravenna.

She was a beauty, doubtlessly, as she sat face to face with the Reverend. Being in her early twenties, her long blonde hair flowed in waves over her shoulders, a bit like sunlight that forms a pyramid through a gap in the clouds. If Andrea's eyes reflected the darkest parts of the nightly skies, just before the first trace of dawn appears at the horizon, then Simonetta's eyes were a reminder of the deep blue sky as it span right now over the Palazzo and the city of Verona. The sun had taken deep breaths from the low-hanging morning fogs, and after that was gone it had licked the pearls of dew from the wet and cool grass, so that in the moment the sky looked like a perfect ball of crystal azure. Around noon the rising heat would send its threads of haze up high, but right now the sun did cast only the most perfect and distinct shadows. Besides the eyes and the hair, which had been the first to catch Hilario's attention, she also had a lovely face. Her nose was straight and maybe a bit sharp, but her full lips (whose colour made Hilario look forward to his evening pasta again) and the soft curves of her chin and up her cheeks to the eyes again made more than amends for that. Simonetta was dressed in a robe of the heaviest emerald green, a hue that reminded one of the healthy grass in the lower meadows, or the more dark and remote corners of a forest, with flashes of ruby satin beneath it. Her delicate shoulders and her long tender neck could be seen to be of a healthy rose, as if a painter had placed his most tender brush of red only once on her skin, or as if one blow of a winter's breeze had made her shiver for a second. At the same time, the gown did not go so far as to indecently attract the beholder's attention. It would have been fair to depict the Madonna nursing the infant Jesus in such a dress, the Reverend judged. He liked what he saw.

Not that he was a dirty man, no, on the contrary. He liked the lass sitting opposite him, sipping his water, and certainly meant her no harm. Much more, he recognized beauty in whichever form God had shaped it, and considered it a reverence of the divine to admire and contemplate it. And then, he also liked to play with fire. The Tempter, he knew well, was of good taste, and habitually appeared beautiful and enticing. So, rather than find himself one day overwhelmed

by the unexpected, the Reverend deemed it wiser (and more in accordance with God's plan), to keep in touch with beauty and constantly put himself to the test with temptation, to harden him against it. For the first few decades of his celibacy, it had sometimes come fairly hard to him, and many a hefty cold bath helped him to stay in tune with the divine harmony God had devised for man. Now, either by his own rigid training or by God's mercy to ease his necessary discipline, he was no longer in true danger of faltering in his ways, and knew that a pretty face held no harm for him anymore. Rather, in sitting in front of the young woman, he felt a certain tickle, a pleasant tension, and could see no reason why he should forbid himself this innocent pleasure.

"Now, my dear child", Hilario heard himself say then, "What is the business that brought you here today?"

He himself found that these words were a bit lame, lacking in lustre, and serving only the cliché of joviality. On the other hand, he was in a very relaxed mood, having just returned from a mass in the beautiful St. Angelo cathedral, and looking forward to having one of the more interesting members of the influential Scala family come to him for a confession later that day. In the meantime, this fair and interesting woman did arouse his curiosity, and he wanted to enjoy the meeting with her without having to care too much for the details of the impression he might make.

She lowered her glance for a minute. The Bishop followed her eyes and came to notice the large number of pearls which adorned Simonetta's emerald dress. They outlined the Venetian lion of St. Marco on her corselet, and he couldn't help but admire the tasteful curve of the silhouette. Yet this wasn't what Simonetta looked at, but rather at a tiny little basket, or wicker box, she held in her lap. It would have been hardly large enough to keep a rat inside.

Then she faced the Bishop again.

"I have been to Constantinople in the winter", she proclaimed straight to the point, "To be honest, it was more in business than a pilgrimage, but once I was there, and my enterprise was taken care of, I decided that I might very well spend a few more weeks in the area, and look after the well-being of my soul as much as I had looked after that of my purse."

"This was very well considered", the Bishop lauded her intentions, "And did you turn your thoughts to deeds as well?"

"Oh yes, certainly, Your Grace", Simonetta exclaimed. "Of course, I did not make it down all the way to the Holy land – you will understand, a woman like myself travelling alone through the realms of the Turks..."

He did raise a hand only ever so slightly to indicate that he was fully aware of the dangers involved, and so she could proceed:

"But I was determined to examine Constantinople to the deepest. I prayed for my salvation, went through much labour and hardship, confessed and repented, and tried to be a Christian as good as I could be, after God had decided to make me a frail and feeble woman."

Hilario felt that he should have a word of comfort at hand:

"God in his wisdom made each one of us weak, though perhaps in different ways. But if we were strong at all times, never faltering, what would then be the point in tempting us?"

He noted that probably that had not been the wisest thing to say: Whence need for God to allow a tempter in the first place? But he found that Simonetta wasn't

inclined to a full-fledged theological dispute anyway:

"Well, at the end of my stay, when my ship back to Venice was ready to hoist sails, I felt that I had truly received my blessing. I felt my sins being forgiven, and I myself being made a stronger woman, ready for a godly and righteous life."

"This is excellent, my child", Hilario noted, getting a bit impatient, "But certainly it is not only this what you wanted to tell me?"

"Oh no, Your Grace. Actually, I was just so thankful for my experiences in Constantinople, and I wanted to express my gratitude by giving this small present to Mother Church. I found it in Constantinople, and have brought it with me all the way, and would like to most humbly present it to you."

With these words she handed the wicker box to Hilario. He paused for a minute. What might be in there? The box was light, and the contents did not rattle or move. Jewels or money would have been a most inappropriate and mundane response to a spiritual experience as that of Simonetta. On the other hand, not even a scroll would have fit in the box, not to mention anything else of value. He could also not really imagine it being an assassination device. Not that it would have been beyond his comprehension if the beautiful young visitor in the green dress turned out to be a murderer, but he had given people little reason in the past to be after his life.

Having reached this point of his ponderings, he just opened the very simple lock on the box and opened it. He was too pragmatical to waste more of his and Simonetta's time with questions when the answer was literally in his hands.

The box contained a mummified toe. The Reverend didn't even have to take it into his own fingers, he could quite easily identify the inch-long piece of shrunken tissue, greyish, purple, black, lying in some velvet lining.

Well, he thought with an inward sigh, still better than an assassination device, but on the other hand not quite in the same league as a tasteful finger ring or cloakpin would have been. Then it dawned upon him:

"I take it, this is not just any toe you have given me?"

"No of course not!" Simonetta insisted, obviously a bit surprised at the Bishop's ignorance, "It's the left great toe of St. Konradin – it's a relic!"

"A relic!" Hilario echoed delighted, and the glee in his voice was genuine, because, as some of the people more closely acquainted to him knew, the collection of relics was one of the hidden passions of the Reverend.

Now, upon closer inspection, he also discovered a small fragment of parchment inside the box, along with a seal, about the size of a fingernail – a nail the size of that of Simonetta's fingers, which were exquisitely small. The greek letters on the parchment declared the toe to be indeed that of St. Konradin, and guaranteed its authenticity.

"What do you want for this?" Hilario came to the point. The toe was in good condition, with even the nail still being attached to it, and in general remainders of St. Konradin were hard to find.

"Nothing", Simonetta replied, "As I told you, Your Grace, this is meant as a gift, as a sign of my gratitude for the way to salvation Mother Church has shown me, and unto which I hope to have made the very first steps."

"Well then", the Bishop said with a certain enthusiasm, "but surely there is something else I can do for you, after the lengths you have taken to come to me, and the long time I had to have you wait? Perhaps some wine, at least?"

"You are too kind, Your Grace", Simonetta rejected, "But I already have taken

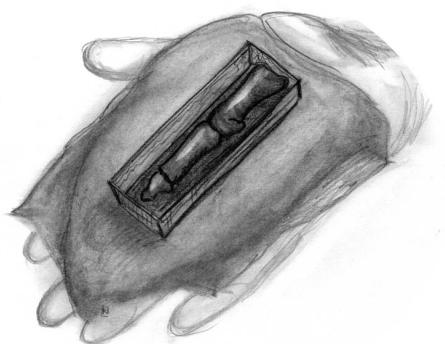
too much of your precious time. I think I'd better leave you now to the important business you have to take care of."

She rose, and recognizing the futility of his attempts to make her stay, Hilario rang for one of the servants to guide Simonetta out again. She thanked him for the time, he thanked her for the toe, she kissed his hand obligingly, and he began to feel sorry that this interesting and exciting encounter should be over already.

She strode out, and when she was already standing under the impressive door frame of oxgall-blackened oak wood –a distinctly teutonic ingredient of the architecture–, a thought seemed to cross her mind, she paused, and turned around halfway, until Hilario could see her body in profile, and she could face him again.

"By the way, where St. Konradin's toe came from, there is more of the like", she announced.

And it occurred to Hilario, that he had completely forgotten to inquire what Simonetta's business was after all.



The Bishop found out soon enough, and so it came to pass that during the next weeks and months, as Spring slowly made way for a Summer increasing in strength with every new sunrise, the wenches on their countless sundry errands in the streets of Verona around the palazzo would meet the young lady Simonetta with an envious look. The glances of the dashing lads of nobler birth would follow her strides with the flash of a sudden unnamed desire. But before this desire could take shape, she would already have stepped around the next corner, or have disappeared in the crowd, and the lads would have to continue on their way just with the vague feeling of having lost something before they ever owned it.

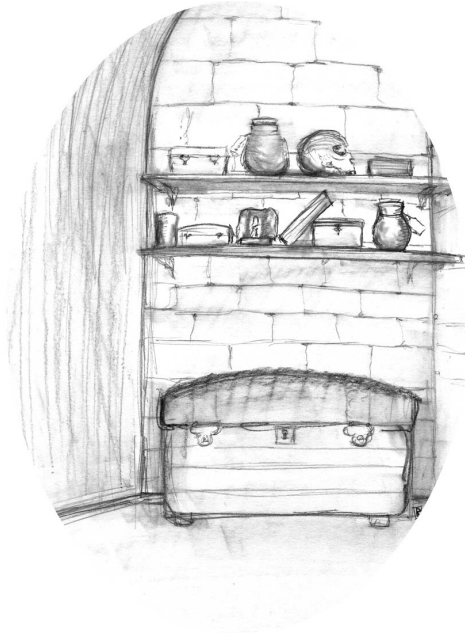
The Bishop himself, of course, was professed with thoughts of a different kind. The procurement of relics was a business, which was not to be taken lightly. Firstly, there a certain amount of money involved. Not only that, but in dealing with the remains of the most noble saints, he also dealt with faith in God itself, with the trust of his flock. After all, the authenticity of the relics had to be ascertained, and their origin had to be documented as well. It was inconceivable that relics which had been stolen or procured in any doubtful fashion – no matter how skillful the deed was done – would still hold any spiritual power, or provide a steady strengthening of the faithful. Not to mention that some of Hilario's *collegi* would have frowned upon his involvement in the mongering of relics – partly because this would have deemed the Bishop unfitting, partly because the other clergymen would be plain jealous of his steady supply with saints. Nevertheless, the simple fact that these relics were 'mongered', or 'peddled', as one might call it, made the Reverend a bit uneasy, and he thought that it would be wise to deal with the matter discreetly.

Of course, the best way to go on about anything discreetly is to be not directly connected with it. Provide yourself with a go-between who deals with the other party and who lets you find out about the results. A trustworthy person, it has to be, with a bit of experience, but little personal ambition. The Reverend was a man with a certainly sharp, straightforward wit. As he sat in his office in the evening, pondering over whom to trust with the business of dealing with Simonetta, his

eyes fell on the novice Andrea, sitting opposite him absorbed in his usual business. The Bishop's first idea was to ask Andrea for counsel, if he knew anybody who could be charged with the delicate task. But of course the Bishop was a wise man who never spoke upon first thought, and before he even took a breath to open his mouth to address Andrea, a second thought crossed his mind. And this thought cancelled the first one completely, as the bright new morning sun supersedes the pale and weary moon. The Bishop viewed this new idea from all sides, and he found no flaw in it, no hooks nor slings, no matter how deeply he probed it in his mind. So finally he cleared his throat to get Andrea's attention, and spoke to him: "Andrea, drop these parchments, and listen to me. I have a new job for you."

Needless to say, Hilario didn't have to convince Andrea for too long of the benefits of the new task. After all, the novice had seen Simonetta on her visits as well, and he had not yet hardened his soul through decades of celibacy.

So, at the next opportunity, the Bishop introduced the two of them formally. He told Simonetta that from this moment on, due to urgent business he had to pursue himself, Andrea would be his agent, and act in behalf of Hilario and the Holy Mother Church. She did not hesitate for too long, either.



Again, some time passed, as the summer seemed to stretch endlessly, with all its vigour and strength, yet not with the merciless parching of Sicily's sun, but always with a drop of dew on its lips when it kissed the earth every morning awake again.

It was Saturday afternoon. Bishop Hilario sat in his very own confession chair in the St. Angelo cathedral, listening to the boys' choir which in the apse of the church rehearsed the *Miserere mei* for no particular occasion. His Grace loved to do so, peeping through the curtain into the nave, where the sun cast the countless colours of the stained glass windows onto the marble floor and the dark hazel benches and chairs, the painted statues and the *freschi* on the walls, in a torrent of turbulent incandescent light, yet at the same time so quiet and peaceful, moving only at the slowest perceivable pace through the hall of the church. Letting his fingers, his old and wrinkled fingers run across the smooth carvings on the chair, watching the ever new and ever same play of light and shade in the cathedral, and listening to the harmony of the boys' voices, he felt himself to be as close to divine perfection as he could expect during his lifetime. And this surroundings helped him to think, and this is why he had come here without anybody actually to expect to ask for a confession. (Who would want to confess while the boys' choir was rehearsing, anyway?) Because he had a problem.

His enterprise with Simonetta indeed did thrive. She met with young Andrea whenever she was in Verona, and he would never fail to return with the considerable piece of a Saint, which he would buy at a decent price. Sometimes for Hilario there would also be something for free in the bargain. For instance he once received the second kneecap of St. Marcellina, too, after he had only paid

for the first. There certainly was no doubt about Simonetta's generosity. Not really in a position to ask who she was and where she came from, he had finally deduced himself that she must have been sprung from a noble family of patricians at Ravenna, because she knew how to keep a customer satisfied. And though the relics she could provide for the Bishop did sometimes lack in originality – after a certain time he got a bit weary of all the kneecaps she had in store for him, but didn't want to offend her by rejecting them. But the only real matter he could complain about was that Simonetta only paid Verona visits at irregular, and too largely spaced intervals.

Nevertheless, the relic business held a problem, due to a little-known obsession of his Grace. Though 'obsession' may be a little too strong a word, to call it 'a pastime' would be too vulgar, so perhaps 'hobby' is the best choice. In any case, in one of the more remote corners of the dungeons underneath the cathedral, where those relics not on display were stored, there was a little cell in which Hilario devoted himself to his project of something like a 'catholic homunculus'. Only the most intimate friends of the Bishop knew about this at all. It was here where he kept 'spare parts' of saints, those pieces of little relevance or value. His plan was to assemble, from these sacred surplus parts, an entirely new body. He didn't quite know what to expect from this once the last piece was fit in. Perhaps this meta-saint would prove in some way miraculous, with the power to heal and the like. Or it might only be a new attraction to pilgrims and visitors of the city, but this actually didn't bother the Reverend too much: His ambitions would already be quenched with the completion of the body.

And here is how the problems started. For reasons he could not really grasp, the Reverend always seemed to be short of a few crucial components of his project. Though he already had managed to have some extra ribs, though he would have been able to outfit his meta-saint with no less than twenty-four toes, had he desired, he somehow never seemed to be able to – forgive the poor pun – lay his hands on a complete set of ten fingers.

This struck Hilario as being odd. Of course, he did not do regular bookkeeping for his project; that would have seemed vile and mundane. He considered his memory as good enough to keep track of what he had, and what he needed. But when he came back from a purchase from Simonetta, and when he walked down the narrow, steep stairs to the dungeon cell with his new acquisition, brimming with anticipation, he would open the door and look at the array of his assets, only to invariably find himself disappointed again.

Thus a shadow was cast on his Grace's otherwise peaceful and composed mind. He wrestled for quite some time with the question of how this could be. He was puzzled at the same time by an image which appeared in his mind every now and then. To wit, when he had met Simonetta in person lately, he had seen that several of the pearls from her elegant embroidery on the beautiful emerald gown seemed to lack. Yet he was neither able to make a connection between the two facts, nor even tell if there was a connection at all. And all the while the choir outside could be heard rehearsing the climactic lines of their chant:

*They spread a net for my feet –
I was bowed down in distress.
They dug a pit in my path –
But they have fallen into it themselves.*



It did not occur to His Grace, that some of Andrea's behaviour had changed during the past weeks. Some days, when dusk slowly approached the city of Verona, flowing down from the Dolomite mountains, his gaze when he peered outside the office in the evening hours seemed to fix something behind the walls of the palazzo, hidden somewhere in the crowds of the streets and piazzas of the city, patiently waiting to make itself seen.

On those days, a certain restlessness would befall the Bishop's assistant, a certain nervousness, which a better observer than the Reverend would perhaps have attributed to impatience. As it was, Hilario only noted with one half-raised eyebrow that Andrea would perhaps spill a bit more of the sauce onto the parchments than necessary, and would sometimes also neglect to arrange them in a properly pseudo-random pattern, as was used. But since Andrea's work still was of more than sufficient quality for the Bishop's purposes, he didn't utter a word. Quietly he proceeded with his own everyday business, sometimes interrupted by the question of the missing fingers of his meta-saint, which cropped up every now and then, only to disappear again a few moments later, when Hilario still had no plausible answer.

The Bishop did not work too much at this time of the year. For one reason, the heat of the day tired him, and so he kept what he did himself to a minimum, and delegated as much as possible of the burdensome chores on his secretaries and advocates. In addition, the better part of the upper crust of Verona fled the summer heat. Up in the mountains or on the coast of the Adriatic, they too limited

their enterprises, which in turn resulted in less work for the Bishop. Thus, it was often possible for him to go to bed with his everyday tasks completed behind him, while there was still some daylight looming on the skies of Verona, and the first stars appearing at the firmament took on a friendly match with the lanterns lit by the guards in the orchard outside the office window.

On such an evening he would get up, stretch himself and yawn, preparing Andrea for his leave without too many words. Except in his sermons, he was a man of few words. Andrea would obligingly stand up and ring the bells for a servant to help His Grace to bed, preparing his night cloths and a glass of cool *Vernaccia* to help promote the sleep. When the servant had received his orders, Andrea knelt down in front of His Grace, and the Reverend would put his hand on his head, pronouncing a short benediction. Although he always said essentially the same thing – wishing Andrea a good night, sweet dreams, and a blessed day tomorrow –, it was a source of amazement for Andrea how the Bishop never used the same words twice, always paraphrasing his sentences slightly. Yet this all never took long, and after a minute the Bishop would be gone, and Andrea got back to his desk, finishing what was left.

At this time of the year, the peach trees in the orchard would be full of ripe and taut fruit, and their scent, especially in these evening hours, when it mixed with the smell of the earth which slowly cooled off again, was intoxicating. Andrea would walk out onto the balcony, and deeply fill his bosom with this aroma, and let himself get even a bit dizzy from it, before closing the books, carefully sorting the parchments, and putting out the lamps and candles, until the only light left was that of the twilight enchanting the orchard, of the few stars visible in the sky, and the soft flickering of the garden' lanterns. Then he would turn around, look outside, and try to find the invisible shape he had been looking for in the evening, and even before that during the course of the day, unnoticed by Hilario, and when there was even less of a chance to find what he had been looking for.

Sometimes with a sigh, sometimes with a smile or a grin, Andrea would then use the key the Reverend had trusted him with, and lock the office door, sneak through the stairs and halls, and take a walk in the palazzo's park, where the peach orchard was.

The palazzo was not completely enclosed with walls – after all, it was not a fortress in an occupied city, a besieged place surrounded by enemies, but a place to meet the Bishop, to 'come to terms with Christ', if one wanted to say so, and therefore supposed to be friendly, inviting, and open to anyone.

So, from the very beginning, parts of the complex building had never been behind a solid brick wall, but a large fence had served as a mostly symbolic border of the palazzo. Over the decades, the fence had become overgrown with hedges of hips and bramble, and at some places the mere weight of the bushes even had torn down part of the aging and fragile wooden construction, with only a random and confused thicket of thorny bushes replacing it. For the reasons mentioned above, nobody really cared about it or bothered to enter the thicket to fix the fences, and thus nobody noted, that actually there was a small gap in the hedges. It wasn't straight and obvious, but a careful observer from some elevated standpoint – say, a balcony in the upper stories of the palazzo – might notice that there was a narrow, winding passage through the bushes, where a careful and slim person might make it right into one of the yards of the palazzo without having to climb obstacles, or

otherwise raise the attention of the guards. It so happened, that the passage lead right away into the peach orchard.

What should I say, what *could* I say? The lovers met in their secret hideaway, the person in the emerald, pearl-studded velvet dress and the man in the simple novice habit. Their business usually didn't take too long – a tiny parcel changing owners, a few words of note for the receiver, and a short exchange of news which were otherwise of importance for the both of them. After that, they found more tender words for each other, in a low voice which could not be heard above the crickets and the cicadas. These seemed desperate to chirp as loud as they could to alert the guards, which did hardly ever patrol in this part of the orchard. Their efforts only helped to conceal the two young people who hid in the shade of the trees in one remote corner of the garden, where the heavy fruits bent down the branches almost to the ground, where the rich and sensual flavour of the peaches filled the air so densely, one could almost catch it. It nearly soaked one's clothes, leaving a tingling sensation on the skin, and it certainly drowned all reason, leaving only the excited senses of the two persons in a wild and raging rule over their bodies.

Many a peach was plucked on those nights, taken into Andrea's hands, where he traced the soft and yet tense skin in its shades of brightly glowing orange, yellow and pink, softened by the silken hair which covered it, following the shape of the crack which ran along one side of the fruit with his fingers, all the way from the bottom to the tiny button on the top. He would pass the fruit on, and Simonetta would touch it, tiny sparkles of light reflecting the faraway lanterns, which shone through the grid of branches and leaves hanging around them, to be seen on her wet lips, when she finally tasted the flesh, savouring the sensation of the sweet refreshing taste on her tongue, in her mouth and down her throat. As the juice of the fruit ran down her skin, she would not let it go, but lick it clean from her fingers and her palms, and her wrist, so not a drop of Andrea's gift would be lost.

So they spent the hours, until even the voice of the nightingale turned exhausted from singing, longing for dawn. And when the first purple hue of morning could be seen approaching on the hills on the east, the lovers kissed one last time, embraced each other with a warmth they would not feel again even during the hottest hours of the day, and they prepared to take leave from each other before the danger of being discovered became too great.

But there was one last thing Simonetta had to do. Although she wasn't entirely true to the Bishop, she still felt it would not be right to take the little parcels from Andrea for nothing. Her conscience in this case was less concerned with Hilario, but rather with the whole idea of stealing from the Church. Buying at a good price was something different, though, and so she insisted on paying for the little gifts she received, and thus as the very last act before they waved a timid good-bye to each other, Simonetta tore one of the pearls from her gown and gave it to Andrea, receiving in return a silent tear. Then she would disappear between the bushes in the thicket.



Fate is what happens to people when they stop paying attention.

In the case of Simonetta and Andrea, fate struck quickly, namely when the Bishop himself undertook one of his short trips down into the cellars below St. Angelo to have a look at his project. On the spur of the moment the Reverend thought (after just having performed a baptism for a newborn child of the Mostretta-family) he might have a look. So he lit a humble oil lantern, went down the stairs between the moist walls glittering of salpetre. He checked into the little cell and found what he had expected, that is, nothing in particular. As he was about to leave the chamber just large enough for him and his relics, he turned around, and his eye was caught by a faint shimmering in a far bottom corner of the cell, much like the twinkling of a star just above the hazy horizon.

His curiosity being aroused, Hilario took the one or two steps that were enough to cross the room, bent down slowly and carefully to avoid the cracking noises his spine had become so prone to during the last decade, and picked up the tiny object, which was just large enough that he could grasp it between his fingers.

Hed had to hold it closely to the eye to examine it, to find out its nature. It was a pearl, not necessarily of a quality for queens and duchesses, but more like those a moderately wealthy merchant wife might be using in larger numbers to adorn her gown with. Indeed, if one brought the pearl up *very* closely to the eye and held the lamp *very* closely, one could see the tiny marks where the pearl had been fastened to the fabric.

Needless to say, since the Bishop wasn't nearly as dim as the chamber he was standing in, it struck him like a revelation. It was as if one of the stained glass windows of St. Angelo had been flung down to the ground and shattered before, and now all the pieces reversed their motion, and reassembled themselves to form

a picture of the events. Or, to put it in the language of the Veronese peasants, the pearl was as good to the Bishop as a nudge to a blind man.

After having convinced himself within a minute that his findings were true, undoubtable and unequivocal, he turned around and left the chamber to tackle the ascent of the stairs with a slow, but determined stride. As he reached the narrow porch which led him to St. Angelo's vestry, he already had laid out his plans.

One of the very next nights, Simonetta and Andrea had another meeting in the orchard. Nothing pointed to the the turn of events they were about to encounter: The fruits were still as plentiful and ripe as ever. The branches and twigs which formed the fence with their strong and vigorous foliage, hid the couple from the world. The leaves themselves competed with the emerald velvet of Simonetta's gown.

With no sudden frightening clamour, loud cries of alarm, or the shouting of trumpets, in a more quiet, subtle way, something changed. Andrea, acquainted with the palazzo's ways, first noticed the changes around him: The faraway rustling of leather harnesses, the chafing of boots over the gravelled pathways, lanterns carried back and forth. At first, Andrea did not connect these events with him and Simonetta, but they stirred him enough to make him break the embrace of the woman, and look around. Perhaps some burglars had been caught on the premises, and now the guards were searching the territory for further intruders. Whatever the cause of the rouse and restlessness, he decided it a good idea for the two of them to take leave of each other immediately.

No sooner had he resolved his mind, when all of a sudden he saw several guards turning a corner, and heading straight for their hideaway. The marching of their approaching feet on the gravel was a dreadful beat. Andrea felt his time ticking away. They had two choices: Simonetta could try to make it directly for the gap in the fence and leave the palazzo immediately, or they could try to hide Simonetta in Andrea's cell for the next few hours, hoping to bring her out after the tumult. This would have involved only a few steps to a porch which led to the novice's quarters. The route to the fence was longer, fence, but of course the complications in hiding Simonetta inside the palazzo were huge.

It was only a matter of seconds. A few whispered words, and the couple made up their minds. The guards had covered but a fraction of the distance to the peach trees, when they parted with a quick and desperate kiss. Simonetta slid through the foliage, and using the protection of the bushes and trees to her advantage, took to the gap in the fence. Andrea waited one more second, then stepped out from between the leaves and branches in full sight of the four or five guards. They stopped in mid-stride when they saw the young man popping out of the thicket, biting gleefully in a freshly plucked peach, the most innocent soul on earth, untouched even by the original sin. So amazed were they, it didn't occur to them that this fellow in the clothes of a monk-to-be made a bit more noise than was necessary; hoping to cover the retreat of his partner.

Andrea considered himself in no immediate danger: Although it would certainly strike the guards as odd that decided on a small dessert of fruit in the middle of the night, as the secretary of the Bishop he had every right to do so.

Simonetta found herself in greater difficulties: Andrea had not been the only one to notice the secret passage which led from the secular world to the territory of the palazzo. But one of the administrators of the Bishop had of late learned about

it, and told His Grace, who in turn was quite capable of figuring out that II and II made IV, even if using only the old-fashioned Roman numerals. The Bishop had told him to leave the gap open. The administrator was only to bar it in the night once the guards were set off.

Thus, Simonetta came to an abrupt halt when she almost ran into the thorns and thickets which blocked her way, only a few steps from the precious road outside, where she could disappear in the darkness. Her heart, already pounding with all its might against her chest, skipped a beat, only to resume working at an even more frantic pace. She looked to the left and to the right, she was indeed at the right spot: Somebody had deliberately locked her in. So, she and Andrea were the target of the nocturnal activity in the palazzo, and Andrea had surely underestimated the trouble in which they found themselves. But now was not the time to reflect: She had to get out of the palazzo as soon as possible.

With a leather cuirass and sturdy gloves, it would have been little problem for her to make way through the obstacles, because it was not a massive barrier or fence in her path, but only some thorny bushes. Even a hefty knife should have done to allow her to cut a passage through the vegetation, but she had neither.

She stood motionless in the darkness. Then, in an instant, it occurred to her. The bushes had not been there an hour ago or so when she had entered the estate, so most probably they were not properly planted into the ground, but had just been torn from some other place and thrown in her path.

She took a heart and delved into the bushes, grasping the rough twigs with her bare hands, and jerking with all the force of her panic. A flash of countless thorns scratched her face and hands, but she didn't let go, and could soon move the bushes with comparative ease. Within a few moments, she had restored the passage and lept forth towards freedom and security on the other side of the fence, when she heard a ripping sound. She didn't care too much, as obviously her gown had been torn on one of the thorns, but she continued, and after another short jump over a tiny ditch, she was safe and sound on the street, and headed immediately for the quiet and peaceful hostel where she resided.

Only later, when she lay on her couch, unwilling, unable to fall asleep, did she realize the full implications of what had happened.

Her blocked escape route pointed clearly to the fact that the Bishop at least suspected what was really going on. This in turn put Andrea into much greater danger than both of them had thought. Things were made worse by the fact that the thorns had ripped quite a patch of cloth from her gown, which certainly would be found at the latest by break of day. Unfortunately, her beloved emerald dress had become something of a trademark. Once the shred was found, the Bishop would have no more doubts about who fled through the bushes.

She turned over on her couch, peering into the sombre, nearly tangible darkness of her chamber. Either way, whether she showed up with the mended green gown or a new one, it would be a dead giveaway. Her business with the Reverend could in no way continue.

A first tear rolled down her cheek from no flesh wound, but from her heart. For, worse than that, she had no idea what would become of Andrea. It was not clear what the Bishop thought about his involvement in the affair. Andrea could usually talk himself out of any trouble with Hilario, but of course this was different. Andrea might go completely unsuspected, or he might already have traded

the humble comfort of his cell for a dark and musty compartment in some dungeon only to await an uncertain fate looming for him in the shape of whips and shackles.

A second tear came from her eye. She would have loved to send him some comfort, to ease some of his pain, but how? It was obviously out of the question for her to show up anywhere around the palazzo in person, and though she had thought about sending a messenger with a letter, she quickly discarded the idea: This very missive, if Andrea still was safe right now, might arouse Hilario's suspicion. She had to remain silent.

The third tear appeared, unseen in the blackness of the chamber. There was no way to take up contact with Andrea again. And in the quarters where she lived, Simonetta was quite well known. If the Bishop sent out his bailiffs to inquire about her... She had to pack her belongings at once, and in the first light head back to Venice, or perhaps even to the South.

She turned over once more, and wiped the tear from her eye. She felt the scratches on her face, that would heal within a few days, and the tear in her skirt could be mended easily enough. The wound in her heart was a different matter...



It is not known if Bishop Hilario ever completed his project for the catholic homunculus. We assume not, as the composite saint never was made known to the public, never announced to pilgrims, never recored in any catalogs or inventories of St. Angelo. It also appears that shortly after the incident, the Reverend's interest in relics ceased and faded away. Instead, he turned to the poorer citizens of Verona, to the homeless and those without families, for whom the brightness and gaiety and music and festivities of the patricians and nobles seemed to be as far away and as unreachable as the saints depicted on St. Angelo's stained glass windows. So, Hilario used the last years of his life in much charitable work. To this day, a hospital in Verona bears his name, and when he finally passed away, yielding his spirit to the powers to which he had devoted his life, he seemed to do so in ease, without bitterness and without grief.

He was succeeded by one Bishop Rocco. This assumed name had been for some time the cleric's nickname, because he was known to mingle with the beggars and the outcasts. Just after his investment, under the frown of many a noble man and devoted follower of the church, he invited the poorest to share dinner with him, right in the venerable palazzo where Hilario had resided, and here they were fed from the same plates and drank from the same goblets as did once the Bishop and his more prestigious guests.

News about this change did not reach Simonetta until several months later, while she was pursuing business in Bologna, which along with Mantua and Cremona held her most faithful customers. She considered the implications without haste – after all, one could assume that Rocco would remain in his office for the

foreseeable future – and finally decided that enough time had passed since she had torn her gown, that by now it would be reasonably safe for her to return to Verona, and try her luck once more.

She had no need to hurry in preparing the return. In her new marketplaces, she was respected with those members of the clergy who were interested in what she had to offer, while the others mostly ignored her. But hardly would anyone give her hard times, and never was she accused of fraud or theft. So she could take her time to let the memory of the orchard overcome the bitter sting of the thorns, and finally she simply got tired of finding excuses to postpone her travel, and packed her belongings.

When she reached the city, she was amazed how little had changed since those days of late spring and early summer, in what seemed so many years ago.

After stating her case to the guards at the gate, she was introduced into the well-remembered palazzo, and asked to wait in the very same room where she had waited once before to meet His Grace Hilario. Little had changed here, too, and her heart pounded more strongly, excited by the business at hand, and by the memories the place recalled.

The door in the ox-gall blackened frame opened, and Bishop Rocco approached, in full regalia, and with a wry smile. He would have recognized her style even had she bothered to assume a different name – But she had not, feeling some kind of betrayal in denying her identity in this very place.

It took her a few seconds to recognize him, though, not only because of his apparel, but because this young rascal, now grown to a respectable man, was about the last person she had expected to have inherited Hilario's chair. After her surprise and doubts, after the moment of shock following the recognition, she let herself fall into his wide open arms, weeping and laughing at the same time, leaving His Grace a bit at a loss as to how to respond. Many an eyebrow was raised, and the servants who witnessed the reunion had for quite some time matter for lively debate down by the wells fed by the Adige.

We shall leave the two alone now, because whatever enterprise they pursued together afterwards, is no longer any of our business.

Those who have the opportunity to visit Verona nowadays, though, are recommended to pay the cathedral of St. Angelo a visit. Not only is it a most beautiful testimony of both architectural skill and profound Christian faith, it also holds a most extraordinary collection of relics for the foundation of which has been laid by His Grace Hilario, and which has endured all the tests of time. If the gentle visitor is seen to be truly interested in the history of relics in general and in the setup of the collection in particular, and if perhaps he would make a kind donation for the upkeep of the cathedral, the priest might be inclined to show him into one of the more remote corners of the collection, where a small piece, hardly two by two inches in size, of emerald green velvet is kept. This, the priest will explain, is a piece of the gown of Santa Simonetta, a saint with a truly peculiar story to be told.

