

Contrappasso

The thousand injuries of ~~Fortunato~~ FELICE I had borne as best I could, but when ~~he~~ SHE ventured upon insult I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. *At length* I would be avenged. . . .

At this point in my model—just three sentences in—Poe suspends his account in order to define a proper revenge. It is not enough, my Master observes, simply to punish. One must punish with impunity. “A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done him wrong.” Excellent guidelines! I would add only one more—for its aesthetic appeal—the rule of contrappasso: “Let the punishment fit the crime.”

From the start Felice rubbed me the wrong way. “*Fe-li-ce*,” she mincingly corrected my pronunciation, then added, with that stunning lack of self-irony that characterized all her speech: “Rhymes with *jealousy*.” She was, in fact, the very embodiment of that vice. Especially when it came to her life’s passion. She could not suffer the perception that anyone in her little circle might know more than she did about opera. If you liked the *Rigoletto* at the Met, she had seen a better one in Milan. If you admired Sutherland or Sills, why, they were nothing compared to Tebaldi.

On the last day of her life—or maybe (I can’t be sure) the next to last—I encountered her in a mirrored hallway at the Plaza Hotel. She was checking her makeup. Even from behind, I knew it was Felice, her wobbly head too big for her starved little body. I might say she reminded me of Nancy Reagan, except, as you know, my humor does not run to cattiness. Anyhow, this was years before the so-called Reagan era.

I bumped her gently. She turned. I let the ticket drop. “Vera!” she exclaimed.

Her surprise could not have been greater, for I had not attended one of these wretched guild affairs in ages. Yet she made no inquiries about my long absence, or my health, but

proceeded to tell me about a conversation she'd just had with a "very promising" young mezzo. "A name to remember . . . Katya . . . Katerina . . . something like that." As she nattered on, half drunk, her eyes finally lighted on the slip of paper at her feet. "Did you drop something?"

"Thank God you noticed!" I picked up the ticket, careful to leave the top half visible. The printer had followed my instructions to the letter. Sixteen-point Bodoni, bold.

She squinted. "Callas?"

"*And Di Stefano*. The farewell tour. Tonight."

"You have a ticket!"

It was less a statement than a wail, a cry against injustice. Why should I be part of the historic event when she had been shut out, she and a hundred other guild members at this shadow celebration? A closed-circuit television flickered in the banquet room across the way. Bitter consolation! One attended a gala performance less to see than to *be seen*. The images now streaming in from Carnegie Hall—the greetings in the lobby, the gowns, the glitter—only served to remind those assembled at this sullen outpost that the real party was elsewhere.

"Actually, an extra ticket," I said, and cast a searching glance into the banquet room. Not every face was dour. Her bibulous Bebe appeared to be in high spirits, his customary Manhattan in one paw and in the other the tanned triceps of Lucretia Horvitz.

"An *extra* ticket!" Felice marveled.

"I would have offered it to you, but remembering how you hate Callas—"

"Hate Callas? I adore Callas!"

"Oh . . . if only I hadn't promised it to Lucretia."

"Lucretia *Horvitz*? No, you can't! It would be a criminal waste. The woman's a philistine! She doesn't know Strauss from Stravinsky!"

"But how—?"

Felice grabbed my arm. Her eyes were wild. "We'll slip away!"

"And abandon all your friends?"

"Hyenas!"

"And Bebe?"

"Bebe can go to hell!"

"But the cold—"

“The cold?” She looked at me queerly: I was inventing obstacles. “It hasn’t killed me yet.”

“Not yet,” I allowed.

Within minutes we were ensconced in the rear seat of a cab hurtling down Seventh Avenue. Felice hunched inside her fur-trimmed parka like a little animal. She wore a smug smile, and her thin cheeks glowed, suffused with an excess of Burgundy and the warmth of her imagined reprisals. To ward off the chill of any second thoughts, I kept her mind fixed on Callas: “I do hope she’ll give us some Bellini. *La Sonnambula*, perhaps. I love her Amina.”

“Her Norma is better.”

“Without doubt her greatest role.”

“Oh, no, that would be Tosca.”

“Certainly Tosca presents a greater dramatic challenge. So many emotions to project. Love, jealousy, rage—”

Felice was shaking her head. “Opera is all about the *voices*.”

“I couldn’t agree more! The acting, the costumes, the orchestra . . . are they really necessary? Just give me that incredible voice. What a range! Callas can sing anything. Soprano, mezzo, contralto, contrappasso.”

“Contrappasso?”

“My favorite! Though one encounters a true contrappasso very rarely these days.”

“So they say,” she replied. “Yet I heard a very good one last year in Covent Garden.”

(Oh no, my too kind friend! Do not excuse her because of the wine. Sober she would have spoken the same. That I must live in the society of such fools is the cause of all my depression. Whatever should I do without *you*?)

The ride went exactly as I’d hoped. Felice babbled the whole way, no more conscious of where she was than *la sonnambula* herself on a rickety plank high above the raging millstream. She did not wonder when we turned off Seventh Avenue, or display any anxiety as the streetlamps petered out, or hesitate at all when we disembarked upon the deserted sidewalk. Not until we had passed into the dim interior of the building did she wake up to her surroundings: “This is *not* Carnegie Hall.”

“No . . . we’re in the old Roderick Theatre.”

“Whatever for?” she asked, irritably.

“A crime,” I said, surveying the ruined lobby—the cracked walls, the scree of glass and plaster at the foot of the grand staircase, the ebony drapes leprous with mold. “Yes, an absolute crime to let a historic building like this come to such an end.”

She remembered that I’d led a fundraiser for the City Landmark Commission. On the spot she pledged a small donation. I laughed. The building was doomed.

“I don’t want to be here!” she protested.

The mists of her inebriation were lifting fast. Thus, too, my spirits. I wanted her fully aware. And if she tried to run? I was prepared to restrain her physically, to force her to her seat, but fortunately such strong-arm methods proved to be unnecessary. I say fortunately because my own physical resources were not unlimited. Don’t forget: I was a year older than Felice and still recovering from a long hospitalization. And I’d already expended a good deal of energy that afternoon, setting things up. I was delighted, therefore, when she clutched my arm and pleaded with me not to leave her alone.

Straightaway I plunged through the black draperies.

A pale unearthly light illumined the auditorium. As we emerged from under the dark swooping balcony, its source was revealed. A paschal moon shone through the collapsed roof. I called to Felice’s attention the shadows it cast upon the side wall like prison bars. Then, as we shuffled through the debris, arm in arm like a pair of old lovers, I pointed out the salient features of the architecture . . . the bird-spattered pilasters . . . the crumbling architrave . . . the charred remains of a coffered ceiling. In the high recesses there was a stirring of shadows, an uneasy rustling of wings. At the same time some sort of vermin broke from under a seat and scurried across our path, most likely a rat, for the place was full of them.

Felice shrieked, “I *don’t* understand what we’re doing here!”

“Have you forgotten already? Callas and Di Stefano. The farewell tour.”

I saw the terror in her eyes. It was coming back to her, the reason for my long absence from society. “Of course,” she played along. “The farewell tour.”

Presently we were standing in the center of that vast ragged opening to the sky. The moon was red and full. The orchestra pit

lay before us, and, immediately behind us, the front-row seat I'd so carefully prepared for Felice. The moment had come. I pushed her back into the chair, and, before she could process what was happening, I had the bicycle tire over her shoulders.

"What!" she cried.

(You're wondering, too. A bicycle tire? But what better substitute for the wall chains of my exemplar? Cheap, effective, and more easily procured. Anyhow, I had no access to a catacomb. Must I explain everything? Let us move on.)

Felice struggled to get free, but I kept the tire pressed down, hooping her and the seatback together. Soon she was spent. She had only enough muscle to carry her through an ordinary day—to lift a spoon, press an elevator button, redraw the shrinking borders of her lips. She offered no resistance beyond a whimper as I lashed her more securely to the seat with bands of surgical tape. The sight of my old friend wrapped in such a manner, as if for an Egyptian burial, was deeply affecting. The moon lent its own garish charms, exciting in the zinc oxide of her bandages an incandescence that was so *Felice*, always dressed more flashily than her years allowed. I left the tire around her chest like a napkin ring. I would need it in the final act.

Lifting her baleful eyes, trying just to keep her big wobbly head erect, Felice asked in a mournful tone: "Why are you doing this to me?"

Your run-of-the-mill avenger would have answered her directly. But simply to tell is not to teach. And I had no intention of rendering superfluous the most exquisite part of the *contrappasso*. Felice would have to discover the answer for herself. Slowly, by degrees.

From under her seat I retrieved a cassette tape player—a "ghetto blaster," I believe such devices were called at the time—and set it on the low wall above the orchestra pit. I waited for the squealing of the rats in the pit to subside and then pressed PLAY. Aurally it was the slash of a knife, the same three notes as in "Three Blind Mice" (*quelle chance!*) but extremely high and shrill (violins), then an octave lower (violas, cellos), and, again, lower still (basses, heavy brass). A swift heart-stopping descent that warned of the terror to come.

"Do you recognize it?"

“*Tosca*,” she murmured.

“Very good! The torture scene. Let’s imagine ourselves in the principal roles, shall we? I’ll be Scarpia, the sadistic chief of police. And you can be the diva Tosca. Ah, that’s me now—what a rich baritone voice I have!—exulting, over dinner, in my own evil. You know the story. I’m planning to rape you this evening. See how I tear into my meat, gulp my wine. Oh, I know, opera is all about the voices, but do try as well to visualize what’s happening. You can *see* the lust and hatred.”

I leaned in to get a full view of her face, partly shielded by her furry hood. Her eyes had that blank catatonic look I had often met during the year of my convalescence. She seemed to be in shock. But behind the blankness, I sensed, she was taking in every word of the opera, seeking in that parallel drama some hint of her own destiny.

A stone crashed to the floor, another section of the crumbling architrave. Flapping wildly, an enormous black creature arrested its fall and disappeared through the open roof. The theater was collapsing around us.

“*Oh, Dio! Che avvien, che avvien?*” the diva screamed, to the accompaniment of loud groans from her lover in an adjoining room, where Scarpia’s men were torturing him. The sound was horrible! But really—I apologized to Felice—what could one expect from an old 1953 recording, monaural at that, re-recorded onto tape? Filtered through the hissing and crackling, the voices of Callas and Di Stefano sounded like ghosts calling over time from a distant past. I observed: “Hard to believe they’re performing at this very moment just a mile away in Carnegie Hall.”

“What did I ever do to you?” she moaned.

Happily, at that instant, Tosca was asking the same question of her tormentor. *Che v’ho fatto in vita mia?* Scarpia did not answer. I did not answer. A prayer being mumbled in the background, from the *Dies Irae*, answered for us: “*Nil inultum remanebit.*” I translated for Felice: “Nothing shall remain unavenged.” The red moon, like a drop of blood, quavered in the watery surface of her eye. She was beginning to grasp the meaning of *contrappasso*.

The huge bird returned through the roof, swooped low over our heads, and clambered up the darkness to a ledge near its former roosting place. It folded its wings and watched.

It was time to switch roles.

Now Tosca was pleading with Scarpia. “*Vissi d’arte*,” she poured out: “I have lived for art.” One of the most moving arias in the whole of opera. I could, as they say, identify. For I too had lived for art, I too had lived for love, and never harmed a living creature. “Who,” I put it to Felice, “who but an opera maven like yourself would ever suppose that a woman capable of such tender sentiments was just minutes away from stabbing her enemy to death?”

I pulled the knife from my pocket, a switchblade, or, as the pawnbroker called it, a *shiv*. I got it with the boom box. What attracted me to it was its handsome appearance: the sinuous curve of the handle, the inlaid bone, the button release. And the idea of its history. Where had it been? What punishments inflicted?

As soon as Felice saw the knife, she began squirming inside her bandages. I pressed the release, the blade snapped to attention. Felice screamed. I threw her screams back at her. In the words of my Master: “I reechoed, I aided, I surpassed them in volume and in strength”—until it occurred to me that civilization had made great strides since his time. No need to waste my energy in a shouting match. I turned up the boom box.

Felice quickly realized the futility in trying to out-scream a ghetto blaster, and began to sob quietly. She knew what was coming. Her fate was in the opera. To help her visualize what was happening—for, as you know, she was willfully deficient in that department—I mimed the part of Tosca. I took my cues from the music. *It swelled*: I hid the knife behind me. *It changed key*: I recoiled as Scarpia shouted, “Tosca, you’re mine at last!” *The orchestra exploded*: I lunged, knife raised, to the exultant cry, “*This is the kiss of Tosca!*”

I pressed STOP.

Felice, her eyes fixed on the blade in my hand, was tensed in expectation of my own kiss. “Don’t kill me,” she whimpered.

“Kill you? Really, Felice, I’m offended you would think I had so little imagination.”

I reached into my pocket and drew out a large wedge of yellow cheese. “Cheddar,” I volunteered. Holding the chunk in my left hand, and the knife in my right, I deftly pulled the blade toward my thumb and offered Felice the first slice. “No? Well, they will not be so picky.”

“They?”

“The rats.”

The sharp odor of the cheese had already attracted their attention. I heard the rustling of dry leaves in the pit. Presently I caught sight of a large seething shadow two or three yards away. I dropped a few slices on the floor. Almost at once the shadow broke apart, and there were dozens of rodents swarming about our feet. Though huge and thus presumably well-fed, they attacked the cheese with a ravenous lust. I do not doubt that if I'd been so foolish as to hand-feed them the pieces, they would have taken my fingers as well. The mere possession of such an attractive bait put me in mortal danger. Hurriedly, I spaced out the remaining slices on the rim of the tire beneath Felice's chin, and bade her farewell.

“You're not going to leave me here!”

“Not to worry,” I said. “Nobody will come in to bother you. No drunks, no derelicts. I'll lock up.” I showed her the key. A fake key, you may be thinking, a prop to intensify her terror. But heeding my Master's advice—“no risk”—I would never have taken the chance that some intruder might stumble in before the rats had done their job. No, it was a genuine key to the building. How did I get it? Impertinent question! Have you forgotten about my work with the City Landmark Commission? Even so, do you think that having assembled for my revenge all the necessary paraphernalia—tickets, tire, tape, boom box, a suitable opera, knife, rats, red moon, and so forth—I could not manage a key? Enough of these cavils!

In leaving I pressed **PLAY** again, and lingered just long enough to enjoy the hatred in Tosca's voice as she taunted the writhing enemy at her feet: “Die, die . . . die!” Callas had never sounded uglier or more convincing.

Felice never received an answer to her question: “What did I ever do to you?” I could not tell her, of course. Leaving her to answer it herself, forcing her to think back upon all her wrongs against me, was part of the punishment. But surely I can tell *you*, and, having continued thus far with me, you deserve nothing less than a full account.

Except . . . my exemplar will not authorize it. Should I presume to know better than my Master? You've read “The Cask of Amontillado.” Tell me, what was the insult for which the

unfortunate Fortunato was walled up alive in a crypt? Poe does not say. Is his silence the result of forgetfulness or lack of craft? I cannot believe it. Was the nature of the insult unimportant? (May I be frank? I'm beginning to question the relevance of my own theme, *contrappasso*.)

What happened to Felice after I left, I cannot say. The building was demolished a few months later. There was a photograph in *The New York Times*. A pile of rubble towered above the bulldozers. The caption read: ANOTHER LANDMARK DESTROYED. I grieved for a year. Even today, whenever I listen to that ancient recording of *Tosca*—to the faraway voices of Callas and Di Stefano, now ghosts indeed—the memories of that fateful night come flooding back, and I am sick to my soul. The doctors are pleased. They take my sorrow for remorse. Now they're pushing empathy. Felice, they would have me believe, saw herself as an innocent, for few of us, or none, are villains in our own minds. Fools! Don't I know that already? It's the very cause of my sorrow. For I could have answered Felice directly as to her sins against me—devoted a day to each of her thousand wrongs—and she would *never* have understood.