

THE SHOES AT THE DOOR

BY LUIGI PIRANDELLO

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ONE hundred and fifty rooms and three stories in the most populous quarter of the city. Three rows of windows, all alike, with the same balustrades, the same mouldings, and the same gray shutters, open, half-open, or nearly closed. An abominable façade! But if there were no façade, who can tell what curious effect might be produced from the outside by these hundred and fifty cells ranged one upon another in rows of fifty, and by the people dwelling in them?

Oh, well, enough of this!

It is not a luxurious hotel, but it is highly respectable and very convenient: elevator, numerous bellboys quick and well trained, good beds, a good dining-room, automobiles. More than one guest has complained that the prices are too high, but in the end they all admit that, though you may spend less at other hotels, you are not so well off and you have not the advantage of being in the centre of the city. The proprietor can afford to smile at complaints about prices and tell the malcontents that they may go elsewhere if they want to. As a matter of fact, the hotel has plenty of patrons, and if every morning, when the steamers come in, and during the day, after each train, people do go elsewhere, it is not because they want to, but because there is no more room.

For the most part they are commercial travelers or provincial people come to the city on business, to prosecute a suit, or to consult a doctor in case of some disease — birds of pas-

sage, in short, who do not stay more than three or four days. Some even arrive in the morning and go on next day. As a result there are a good many valises and trunks to handle, and so there is a great deal of bustle, a great deal of hurrying back and forth from breakfast time till long past midnight. The chief clerk is driven almost crazy. At one moment the house is full. A moment afterwards, three, four, five rooms are empty. Number 15 on the first floor is leaving. So are Number 32 on the second and Numbers 2, 20, and 45 on the third. Then suddenly two more guests announce their departure, and a man arriving late may easily find the best room on the first floor free, while someone coming a little while before might have had to content himself with number 51 on the third floor. There are fifty rooms on each of the three floors, but each floor has a number 51 because there is no number 13. From twelve you jump to fourteen, so that whoever takes room number 14 is quite certain of escaping misfortune.

There are some old clients who call the bellboys by name and have, for their own part, the satisfaction of being called by their names, instead of being mere numbers — the numbers of the rooms they happen to occupy — like most of the guests. These are the people who have no home, the people who, with valise perpetually in hand, travel from one end of the earth to the other, the people who are quite at home in any place, whatever it may be, the people ready for all contingencies and quite

sure of themselves. Most of the other guests have an air of irritation which almost amounts to anger — a troubled air, an air of chagrin. Not only are they absent from their own countries, not only are they absent from their houses, they are even absent from themselves: torn from their social round of habits and the customs by which they orient each day the pitiful reality of their daily lives, they cannot find themselves. They scarcely know themselves. It is as if everything in them were stopped, suspended in a void which they do not know how to fill, a void in which each man fears to see from moment to moment things appearing under an unknown aspect. Each fears to behold new desires, strange curiosities growing in himself, or at least to feel and touch some different, some mysterious truth, not merely in his environment but even in himself.

Wakened too soon by the unaccustomed bustle of the hotel or the noise of the street, they rush in haste about their business, only to find all offices and stores closed. The lawyer will not be down to business for an hour. The doctor will not be keeping office hours till half past nine. At last, their business done, they feel deafened, bored, and exhausted. They come back to shut themselves up in their rooms with two or three nightmare hours to pass before their trains depart. They stroll about, smoke furiously, stare at the bed without feeling like lying down, at a sofa without wanting to sit down, at a window without wishing to look out of it. What a queer-looking bed! What an odd shape for the sofa! What a horrible mirror!

Suddenly they begin to remember forgotten errands. A new device to clip the beard! Garters for their wives! Collars for their dogs! And then they ring hurriedly. They demand addresses and information from the porter. They

must have a dog collar with a little plate — ‘like this and about so big’ — on which to engrave the name.

‘The name of the dog?’

‘No, no, my name with the address.’

They hear the bellboys hurrying back and forth through the corridors. All of life is passing out there — restless life, life with its thousand activities in perpetual turmoil, life with all its tasks!

There is, for example, up there on the second story in number 12, an old lady in mourning who persists in asking everybody whether seasickness is very bad. She has to go to America and has never been at sea before. She arrived last evening almost exhausted, supported on one side by her son and on the other by her daughter — they too in mourning.

The proprietor of the hotel makes a special point of knowing, at six o'clock Monday evening, exactly how many rooms are ready. That is when the Genoa boat comes in, with many American travelers, and at the same time the through train from the outside world. Yesterday more than fifteen foreigners came to the hotel. Only two suites were left. Only four people could be received — the poor lady in mourning, with her son and daughter, in number 12 on the second floor, and a gentleman who got off the Genoa boat, in number 11. At the desk the head clerk inscribed on the register: —

‘M. Persico with his mother and sister, from Vittoria.’

‘M. Rosario Funardi, business man, New York.’

The old lady, to her regret, had to separate from another little family which was also composed of three persons, with whom she had come on the train and who had shown her the address of this hotel. She was still more disconsolate when she learned that they could not have the suite beside hers.

If only number 11 had not been given a moment before to this M. Funardi from New York!

When he saw his old mother in tears on the neck of the lady who had been her traveling companion, the young man tried to persuade Mr. Funardi to give up his room to this family. He made his request in English, for this young man had himself become an American. With his sister he had come back from the United States, scarcely fourteen days ago, recalled by a misfortune — the death of his brother, with whom his old mother was living in Sicily. Now he was returning to the United States for good, with his mother and sister.

The old mother was weeping. She had wept so much and suffered so much in all that long voyage by train, the first she had ever made in all her sixty-seven years. She had torn herself away, not without distress, from the house in which she had grown old and from the new-made grave of her son, with whom she had lived alone for so many years — away from all the things she loved best, even from the memories of her native country. And now on the point of quitting forever her native Sicily, she clung to everything and everybody, just as the evening before she had clung to the lady who had traveled with her, unwilling to release her.

But Mr. Funardi had not been willing to yield. He answered 'No' with a shake of his head when he heard the request that the young man made in English — a blunt American 'No,' with a frown of his heavy brows, with a puffed and yellowish face, all bristling with an unshaven beard. And he got into the elevator, to go up to suite 11 on the second floor.

In spite of all her son and daughter could do, it was impossible to persuade the old lady to use the elevator herself.

Mechanism, no matter what kind, inspired her with a dismay that amounted to terror. And to think that now she was to go to New York, to America, that she had to traverse the vast expanse of the ocean! Her children urged her to be calm, assured her that she would not be seasick. But she was not to be persuaded. She had suffered so much in the train! And every instant she kept asking somebody or other whether it was true that everybody did not get sick at sea. The bell-boys, the chambermaids, and the porters hit on a device to get rid of her, and one and all urged her to inquire about it of the gentleman in the suite next hers. He had just got off the Genoa boat and was going back to America himself. Look at him! There was a man who had passed any number of days at sea, and had often crossed the ocean. He could tell whether you get sick at sea or not.

As soon as it was dawn — her children had gone out to get the baggage they had left at the station and to make a series of purchases — the old lady opened her door stealthily, to stare at the door of the next room. She wanted to ask the man who had crossed the ocean whether you get sick at sea or not. By the first livid and hesitant sunbeam through the great window that opened down the length of that dismal corridor, she saw two long lines of shoes, left and right, a pair before each door. From moment to moment, she saw the number of gaps in the long files increasing. She surprised more than one arm stretched stealthily from one door or another to grasp the pair of shoes that stood before it.

Now every pair had been taken in. Only those at the door next hers remained, the shoes of the man who had crossed the ocean and whom she especially wanted to ask whether you get sick at sea or not! Nine o'clock! Now it was after nine, half past nine, ten o'clock!

The shoes were still there, The only pair in the corridor! The only pair! And they stood in front of that door beside hers, in front of that door that remained shut. There was so much noise in the corridor, so many people bustling back and forth: bellboys, chambermaids, porters. All the guests, or almost all, had gone out. Many had even come back. All the bells had rung and continued to tinkle from time to time. Never for a moment did the low hum of the elevator stop. Up and down, from the second floor to the third, from the third to the ground floor, back and forth — and yet the gentleman never woke. It must be eleven o'clock, and that pair of shoes was still there, before the door. There they stood.

The old lady could no longer contain herself. She saw a bellboy passing, stopped him, pointed to the shoes.

'What is this? Is that gentleman still asleep?'

'Oh,' replied the bellboy, shrugging his shoulders, 'that shows he is tired. He has traveled so much.' And he went on.

The old lady made a gesture as if she would say, 'Well, there you are!' pulled in her head, and closed the door. A moment later she opened it and looked out with a strange astonishment at those shoes that were always there. He must have traveled a good deal, that man. Many a journey they must have borne him on, those two wretched old shoes — enormous, out of shape, down at the heel, with worn-out elastics, and sunk on each side. Who knew what weariness, what difficulties, what exhaustion they had endured, or on how many roads? The old lady almost — yes, almost — felt the temptation to tap at that door with the tips of her fingers, but she drew back again into her room. Her children were slow about coming back. Her agitation grew. How could she tell whether they had really

gone, as they had promised, to look at the sea and see whether it was calm? The sea was so distant. It never ended. They would tell her it was calm, of course, but who could believe that? Only the gentleman in the next room could really tell her the truth.

She listened. She leaned against the partition, to see if she could hear the least sound. Nothing. Silence. But it was already past noon. How could he possibly be sleeping still? There, the luncheon bell was sounding! From doors all along the corridor gentlemen emerged and hurried down to the dining-room. She went to the door to see whether the shoes caught anybody's attention. No, no, nobody noticed. They all went past, unheeding. A waiter came up to call her. Her children were below. They had just come. They were waiting in the dining-room, and the old lady went down with him. Now there was no one in the corridor. All the rooms were empty. The pair of shoes stood waiting, waiting in the solitude, waiting in the silence before that still-closed door. They seemed like penitents. Made for travel, left there useless, used up, after so much service they seemed shameful and pitiable. They seemed as if asking to be taken away.

On their way back from luncheon, noting the astonishment and dismay of the old lady, the other guests stopped to look at them with curious uneasiness. What was the name of that American who came last evening? Who saw him? He got off the Genoa boat. Perhaps he did not sleep last night. Perhaps he had a bad time at sea. He came from America. If he was sick at sea, who knows how many nights he suffered from insomnia? Perhaps he wanted to make up for it by sleeping all day. But how could he amid all this noise?

It was already noon. The crowd

around the pair of shoes in front of the closet door grew, but instinctively all kept at a distance, forming a circle. A bellboy went to call the chief clerk, who sent for the proprietor, and then both of them, one after the other, rapped at the door. Nobody replied. They tried to open it, but it was locked inside. They rapped louder and louder. Silence again. Now there was no doubt. They must inform the police at once. Luckily there was a station close at hand. An inspector came back with two officers and a locksmith. The door was forced. The officer forbade entry to the curious throng that surged forward. The inspector and the proprietor of the hotel went in alone.

The man who had crossed the ocean had died in his hotel bed his first night ashore. He had died in his sleep, with one hand under his cheek, like a child.

All these living people, these people whom restless life had gathered together for a day, people who had come on the most opposite tasks, engaged in the most varied activities, pressed about this little room, this single cell in the beehive where a life had stopped. The news spread through the hotel. From top to bottom they all came running. They all wanted to see, to know: who was dead, who had died?

'Keep out.'

The police commissioner and the doctor were in the room now. Through the door along the passage — look, look! — you could see the dead man on his bed! There was his face. Oh, how white! The man had one hand under

his cheek. He seemed to sleep like a child. Then they began again. Who was he? What was his name? Nobody knew. All they knew was that he came from America, from New York. Where was he going? Who expected him? Nobody knew. There was no hint in the papers found in his pockets or his bag. He was a business man — but in what line?

There were sixty-five lire in his wallet and a few coins in a little purse in his waistcoat pocket. One of the officers had just placed on the marble of the stand those poor shoes that were so down at the heel.

Little by little, to escape the crowd, everyone went back to his room up on the third story or down on the first. Gradually they all went about their business, taking up again their individual cares.

Only the old lady who wanted to know whether you get sick at sea stood there before that door, in spite of all her children could do. She stayed to weep, overwhelmed by the fate of this man who had died after crossing the ocean, that same ocean which she herself was to cross to-morrow.

Amid the blasphemy and curses of the coachmen and the porters who bustled ceaselessly back and forth, they closed the big door of the hotel as a sign of mourning, leaving only a little door still open.

'Closed? Why is it closed?'

'Oh, nothing. Somebody died in the hotel!'

AMAZON SKETCHES

BY ARNOLD HÖLLRIEGEL

From *Prager Tagblatt*, September 14
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WHEN our good ship Hildebrand dropped anchor before the city of Pará, the harbor officials confirmed the disturbing rumors of revolution that we had been receiving by wireless during the voyage. When I landed the people of Pará were burying a young captain who the day before had induced the Twenty-sixth Battalion of Chasseurs to rise against the Government. He had been killed during the street fighting and his soldiers had been overpowered. A newspaper which I bought from a barefooted half-Indian boy reported that the State of Amazonas, farther up the river, was in full revolt, and that the rebels had occupied Fort Obidos.

'Perhaps we 'll be able to send a vessel up in a few days,' they told me consolingly at the office of the Booth Line.

Although I am almost in the midst of this revolution, I do not profess to understand its causes. I know that sudden and violent tropical tempests sweep across this vast sultry country, flooding lowlands and laying great forests prostrate; but the hot sun quickly dries the earth behind the receding waters, and luxuriant vegetation soon covers all traces of the hurricane's recent ravages. It may be that these political storms are of a similar nature. A military revolt in the State of São Paulo was frequently mentioned on the Hildebrand during our trip over, but we were told comfortingly: 'That's a long way from the Amazon Valley.' When I questioned the Brazilian passengers aboard regarding it, they merely shrug-

ged their shoulders and said: 'You know — politics!' None of them appeared to know the real cause of the trouble, or why the insurgents were fighting, nor did any of them seem greatly interested in the matter. They let me translate the wireless dispatches for them, standing in their pointed patent-leather slippers, perfumed cigarette in hand, and surmising: 'Apparently a little dissatisfaction exists in the southern part of the country. Our politicians, you know, senhor —' and a sweeping gesture.

Many men died fighting down in the State of São Paulo without knowing why. Then the storm-clouds suddenly swept northward — revolution in the State of Sergipe, where the still semi-independent Botocudo Indians live; disorders in Parahyba and Maranhão. Then things suddenly broke loose in the depths of the Amazonian forests, in that great curious city of Manaos, where residents in the suburbs can hear the jaguars roar in the neighboring jungle. On July 23 the city garrison revolted. The police made an ineffective resistance. The crew of a gunboat in the river went over to the rebels. The insurgents imprisoned the Governor of the State and put a young lieutenant in his place. A captain, a military surgeon, and fourteen lieutenants formed the revolutionary Government.

I do not know why these men mutinied, or if there was a reason. The affair was not mentioned in the number of *Jornal do Povo* that I bought. A revolutionary handbill that fell into