

The Heretic of Soana

TRAVELLERS CAN SET OUT for the summit of Monte Generoso from Mendrisio, or by the funicular from Capolago, or from Melide via Soana, where the road is most arduous. The entire district belongs to Ticino, a Swiss canton of Italian population.

At a great height, mountain climbers not infrequently came upon the figure of a bespectacled goatherd, whose exterior was striking in still other respects. The face indicated a man of education, despite the tanned skin. He looked not unlike the bronze statue of John the Baptist by Donatello in the cathedral at Siena. His hair was dark and fell in curls over his brown shoulders. His clothing consisted of goatskin.

When a troop of strangers approached this man, the guides usually began to laugh. Then, when the tourists saw him, they often burst out into unmannerly guffaws, or made provocative remarks; they felt justified by the strangeness of the sight. The herdsman paid no attention to them. He did not even turn his head.

All the guides really seemed to be on good terms with him. Often they would clamber up to him and have long confidential talks with him. When they returned and were

asked by the tourists what sort of strange saint he was, they would usually observe a mysterious silence until he was out of earshot. But those travellers whose curiosity was still active would then find that this person had an obscure history and, popularly called the “heretic of Soana”, enjoyed a dubious reputation, mingled with superstitious fear.

When the writer of these pages was still young in years and often had the good fortune to spend glorious weeks in beautiful Soana, it was inevitable that he should ascend Generoso now and then, and that he too should catch a glimpse one day of the so-called heretic of Soana. He did not forget the man’s appearance. And after he had collected all sorts of contradictory information about him, there ripened within him the resolve to see him again – indeed, to make him an actual visit.

The writer was strengthened in his purpose by a German Swiss, the physician of Soana, who assured him that the eccentric fellow was not averse to receiving visits from educated persons. He himself had once called on him. “I really ought to be angry with him,” said he, “because the fellow encroaches on my preserves. But he lives so high up, so far away, and is only consulted – thank Heaven – in secret by those few who would not object to being cured by the Devil.” The physician continued, “You must know that the people believe he had sold himself to the Devil – a view which is not contested by the clergy, because they originated it. In the beginning, they say, the man fell a prey to an evil spell, until he himself became a confirmed villain and a hellish sorcerer. As for me, I did not notice that he had either talons or horns on him.”

Of his visits to this strange person the writer still has an exact recollection. The manner of the first meeting was remarkable. A special circumstance gave it the character of an accident, for the visitor found himself by a steep wayside, face to face with a helpless mother goat which had just dropped one kid and was about to give birth to a second. The lonely creature in her distress, looking fearlessly at him as if she had expected his help, and the deep mystery of any sort of birth there, amid the tremendous rocky wilds, made the profoundest impression upon him. But he hastened his steps, for he concluded that this animal must belong to the herd of the eccentric, and wished to summon him to help. He encountered him among his goats and cattle, told him what he had observed and led him to the labouring mother, behind which the second little kid, damp and covered with blood, was already lying in the grass.

With the assurance of a physician, with the tender love of the compassionate Samaritan, the animal was now cared for by its owner. After he had waited a certain time, he took one of the newborn kids under each arm and set out slowly, followed by the mother, her heavy udder almost scraping the ground, on the way to his dwelling. The visitor was not only favoured with the friendliest thanks, but invited in the most cordial manner to accompany the herdsman.

The hermit had erected several buildings on the Alp, which he owned. One of them resembled outwardly a rude heap of stones. Inside it contained warm, dry stabling. The goat and her kids were stabled here, while the visitor was conducted higher up the mountain to a square whitewashed

hut which, leaning against the wall of Generoso, stood on a vine-covered terrace. Not far from the little gate there shot out of the mountain a stream of water as thick as your arm, filling an immense stone basin that had been hewn out of the rock. Beside this basin, an iron-bound door opened into a mountain cave, which soon turned out to be a vaulted cellar.

One had from this spot – which, when viewed from the valley, seemed to hang at an inaccessible height – a glorious view, of which, however, the author does not intend to speak. On that occasion, to be sure, when he enjoyed it for the first time, he passed from speechless astonishment to loud exclamation of rapture and back again to speechless astonishment. His host, however, who just at this moment stepped out into the open again from the dwelling, where he had been looking for something, seemed all at once to be walking with quieter feet. The way he acted – indeed, the entire calm, tranquil bearing of his friendly host – the visitor did not allow to escape him. It served him as an admonition to be sparing of words, chary of questions. He was already too fond of the strange herdsman to run the risk of alienating him by even a hint of curiosity or obtrusiveness.

The visitor of that day can still see standing on the terrace the round stone table, with its circle of benches. He sees it covered with all the good things which the heretic of Soana spread out upon it: the most glorious Stracchino di Lecco,* delicious Italian wheat bread, salami sausage, olives, figs and medlars, and then a jug of red wine, which he had drawn fresh from the grotto. When they sat down,

the long-haired, bearded host, with his goatskin garments, looked warmly into the visitor's eyes, and at the same time clasped his right hand, as if wishing to intimate an affection for him.

Of what was said at this first meeting the writer remembers only a little. The mountain herdsman wished to be called Ludovico. He related some things about Argentina. Once, when the tinkle of the Angelus* came up from far below, he made a remark about this "certainly provoking noise". The name of Seneca was mentioned. There was also some superficial talk about Swiss politics. Finally, the host wished to know a number of things about Germany, because it was the visitor's home. When the visitor was ready to leave, the hermit said, "You will always be welcome here."

Although the writer of these pages, as he will not conceal, was avid to hear the history of this man, even on his renewed visits he avoided betraying any interest in it. People had communicated to him a few external facts in conversations which he had had in Soana – facts which were said to be the cause for Ludovico's being described as the heretic of Soana – but he took far more interest in finding out in what sense this appellation was correct, and in what peculiar inward vicissitudes – what special philosophy – the form of Ludovico's life had its roots. Yet he reserved his questions, and was richly rewarded for it.

He usually found Ludovico alone, either among the animals of his herds or in his cell. A few times he came upon him as he, like Crusoe, was milking the goats with his own hand or was putting the kids to a recalcitrant mother. Then he seemed wholly absorbed in the herdsman's calling: he

rejoiced over the female that dragged her swelling udder on the ground, over the male when he was in heat and mating. Of one he would say, "Does he not look like the Evil One himself? Just see his eyes. What power, what sparkling rage, fury, maliciousness! And, at the same time, what sacred fire!" But to the author it seemed as if the eyes of the speaker held the same devilish flame as that which he had called a sacred fire. His smile would take on a rigid and fierce character; he would show his splendid white teeth and at the same time fall into a state of dreaming as he observed with the glance of the expert one of his demoniacal matadors at his useful labour.

Sometimes the heretic played the pan pipe, and the visitor would hear its simple scales as he drew near. On such an occasion the conversation naturally turned to music, and the herdsman unfolded strange views. Never, when he was among his flocks, did Ludovico speak of anything but the animals and their habits, of the herdsman's calling and its usages. Not uncommonly would he pursue the psychology of the animals, the mode of life of the herders, back into the remotest past, thus betraying a knowledge of no common scope. He was speaking of Apollo, telling how the latter tended the herds of Laomedon and Admetus, and was a servant and herdsman. "I should like to know with what instrument he used to make music for his flocks." And as if he were speaking of something real, he finished: "By Heaven, I should have liked to listen to him." Those were the moments when the shaggy recluse might perhaps cause one to suspect that his powers of understanding were not quite undamaged. On the other hand, the idea gained a

certain justification when he proved in how many ways a flock may be influenced and guided by music. With one note he chased them to their feet, with others he calmed them down. With certain notes he brought them from afar, with others he induced the animals to scatter or to trail along behind him, close at his heels.

There were also visits when almost nothing was said. Once, when the oppressive heat of a June afternoon had ascended even to the pastures of Generoso, Ludovico, surrounded by his recumbent, cud-chewing flocks, was found likewise outstretched in a state of blissful somnolence. He only blinked at the visitor and motioned to him to stretch out in the grass likewise. Then, after this had been done and both had lain a while in silence, he suddenly began in a trailing voice:

“You know that Eros is older than Kronos – and mightier, too! Do you feel this silent glow about us? Eros! Do you hear how the cricket is chirping? Eros!” At this moment two lizards, chasing each other, darted like a flash across him as he lay there. He repeated, “Eros, Eros!” – and, as if he had given the command for it, two strong bucks now arose and attacked each other with their curved horns. He left them undisturbed, although the combat grew more and more heated. The clash of the blows rang louder and louder, and more and more frequent. And again he said, “Eros, Eros!”

And now there came to the ears of the visitor, for the first time, words that made him particularly attentive, because they shed – or, at least, seemed to shed – some light on the question of why Ludovico was called “the heretic” by the people. “I would rather,” he said, “worship a live

he-goat or a live bull than a hanged man on a gallows. I do not live in an age that does that. I hate – I abhor it. Jupiter Ammon was represented with ram's horns. Pan has the leg of a goat, Bacchus the horns of a bull. I mean the Bacchus Tauriformis or Tauricornis of the Romans. Mithra, the sun god, is represented as a bull. All peoples used to revere the bull, the he-goat, the ram, and to shed their sacred blood in sacrifice. To that I say: amen! For the procreative power is the creative power – procreation and creation are the same thing. To be sure, the cult of that power is no tepid whimpering of monks and nuns. Once I dreamt of Sita, the wife of Vishnu, who assumed human form under the name of Rama. The priests died in her embrace. Then for a moment I had a glimpse of all sorts of mysteries – of the mystery of the black procreation in the green grass, of the mother-of-pearl-coloured lust, of ecstasies and torpors, of the secret of the yellow maize kernels, of all fruits, all swellings, all colours of every kind. I could have bellowed in a frenzy of pain when I caught sight of the pitiless, all-powerful Sita. I thought I should die of desire.”

During this revelation, the writer of these lines felt like an involuntary eavesdropper. He arose with a few words that were meant to give the impression that he had not heard the monologue, but had been preoccupied with other matters. He started to leave. Ludovico would not permit it. And so the visitor was entertained again on the mountain terrace, and what happened this time was significant and unforgettable.

Directly upon his arrival the visitor was ushered into the dwelling, the interior of the hut which has already

been described. It was square, neat, had a fireplace and resembled the simple study of a scholar. It contained ink, pen, paper and a small library – principally of Greek and Latin authors. “Why should I conceal from you,” said the herdsman, “that I am of a good family, and that I had a misguided youth and a good education? You will, of course, wish to know how I turned from an unnatural person into a natural one, from a captive into a freeman, from a warped and morose man into a happy and contented one? Or how I shut myself out of society and Christianity?” He laughed loudly. “Perhaps I shall write some day the story of my conversion.” The visitor, whose suspense had reached a climax, once more found himself suddenly driven far from the goal. Nor did he progress much when his host wound up by declaring that the cause of his rebirth was this: he worshipped natural symbols.

In the shade of the rock, on the terrace, by the brim of the overflowing basin, in delicious coolness, they supped more richly than the first time: smoked ham, cheese and wheat bread, figs, fresh medlars and wine. They chatted about many things – not boisterously, but with quiet gaiety. But now there came a moment which is as present to the writer as if it had just passed.

The bronzed herdsman gave an impression of savagery with the long, unkempt curls of his hair and beard and his goatskin clothing. He has been compared to Donatello’s John the Baptist. And indeed, his face and the features of that John had much similarity in the fineness of the lines. Ludovico was really handsome, on closer inspection – provided one could set aside the distorting eyeglasses. On the other hand, to be sure, it was through them that the

entire figure gained, aside from a slightly comic effect, its puzzlingly strange and arresting character. At the moment of which we are speaking, the entire person underwent an alteration. Since the bronze-like aspect of his body had also found expression in a certain rigidity of the features, it disappeared as they became animated and rejuvenated. He smiled, one might say, in an access of boyish embarrassment. "What I am going to ask you now," said he, "I have not yet proposed to any man. Where I have suddenly found the courage I really don't know myself. From the old habit of past days I still read occasionally, and still handle pen and ink, too. So I have written down in idle winter hours a plain story of events which are said to have taken place here, in and about Soana, long before my time. You will find it extremely simple, but it attracted me for all sorts of reasons, which I will not discuss now. Tell me briefly and frankly: will you go into the house with me once more, and do you feel inclined to waste some of your time in hearing this story, which has cost me too many a profitless hour? I should rather dissuade than urge you. Moreover, if you say so, I will take the pages of my manuscript even now and throw them down into the abyss."

Of course this did not happen. He took the jug of wine, went into the house with the visitor, and the two sat facing each other. The mountain herdsman had unrolled from the finest goat's leather a manuscript written in a monkish hand on strong paper. As if to give himself courage, he drank the visitor's health once more before pushing off from the shore, as it were, to plunge into the stream of the narrative, and then began in a melodious voice.