A Parable in Three Acts by Luigi Pirandello

CHARACTERS
LAMBERTO LAUDISI.
SIGNORA FROLA.
PONZA, SON-IN-LAW OF SIGNORA FROLA.
SIGNORA PONZA, PONZA'S WIFE.
COMMENDATORE AGAZZI, A PROVINCIAL COUNCILLOR.
AMALIA, HIS WIFE.
DINA, THEIR DAUGHTER.
SIRELLI.
SIGNORA SIRELLI, HIS WIFE.
THE PREFECT.
CENTURI, A POLICE COMMISSIONER.
SIGNORA CINI.
SIGNORA NENNI.
A BUTLER.
A NUMBER OF GENTLEMEN AND LADIES.

Our own times, in a small Italian town, the capital of a province.

ACT I
The parlor in the house of Commendatore Agazzi. A door, the general entrance, at the back; doors leading to the wings, left and right.

LAUDISI is a man nearing the forties, quick and energetic in his movements. He is smartly dressed, in good taste. At this moment he is wearing a semi-formal street suit: a sack coat, of a violet cast, with black lapels, and with black braid around the edges; trousers of a light but different color. Laudisi has a keen, analytical mind, but is impatient and irritable in argument. Nevertheless, however angry he gets momentarily, his good humor soon comes to prevail. Then he laughs and lets people have their way, enjoying, meanwhile, the spectacle of the stupidity and gullibility of others.

AMALIA, Agazzi's wife, is Laudisi's sister. She is a woman of forty-five more or less. Her hair is already quite grey. Signora Agazzi is always showing a certain sense of her own importance from the position occupied by her husband in the community; but she gives you to understand that if she had a free rein she would be quite capable of playing her own part in the world and, perhaps, do it somewhat better than Commendatore Agazzi.

DINA is the daughter of Amalia and Agazzi. She is nineteen. Her general manner is that of a young person conscious of understanding everything better than papa and mamma; but this defect must not be exaggerated to the extent of concealing her attractiveness and charm as a good-looking winsome girl.

As the curtain rises Laudisi is walking briskly up and down the parlor to give vent to his irritation.

LAUDISI. I see, I see! So he did take the matter up with the prefect!

AMALIA. But Lamberto dear, please remember that the man is a subordinate of his.

LAUDISI. A subordinate of his ... very well! But a subordinate in the office, not at home nor in society!

DINA. And he hired an apartment for that woman, his mother-in-law, right here in this very building, and on our floor.

LAUDISI. And why not, pray? He was looking for an apartment; the apartment was for rent, so he leased it—for his mother-in-law. You mean to say that a mother-in-law is in duty bound to make advances to the wife and daughter of the man who happens to be her son-in-law's superior on his job?

AMALIA. That is not the way it is, Lamberto. We didn't ask her to call on us. Dina and I took the first step by calling on her and—she refused to receive us!

LAUDISI. Well, is that any reason why your husband should go and lodge a complaint with the man's boss? Do you expect the government to order him to invite you to tea?

AMALIA. I think he deserves all he gets! That is not the way to treat two ladies. I hope he gets fired! The idea!

LAUDISI. Oh, you women! I say, making that complaint is a dirty trick. By Jove! If people see fit to keep to themselves in their own houses, haven't they a right to?

AMALIA. Yes, but you don't understand! We were trying to do her a favor. She is new in the town. We wanted to make her feel at home.

DINA. Now, now, Nunky dear, don't be so cross! Perhaps we did go there out of curiosity more than anything else; but it's all so funny, isn't it! Don't you think it was natural to feel just a little bit curious?

LAUDISI. Natural be damned! It was none of your business!

DINA. Now, see here, Nunky, let's suppose—here you are right here minding your own business and quite indifferent to what other people are doing all around you. Very well! I come into the room and right here on this table, under your very nose, and with a long face like an undertaker's, or, rather, with the long face of that jailbird you are defending. I set down—well, what?—anything—a pair of dirty old shoes!

LAUDISI. I don't see the connection.

DINA. Wait, don't interrupt me! I said a pair of old shoes. Well, no, not a pair of old shoes—a flat iron, a rolling pin, or your shaving brush for instance—and I walk out again without saying a word to anybody! Now I leave it to you, wouldn't you feel justified in wondering just a little, little, bit as to what in the world I meant by it?

LAUDISI. Oh, you're irresistible, Dina! And you're clever, aren't you? But you're talking with old Nunky, remember! You see, you have been putting all sorts of crazy things on the table here; and you did it with the idea of making me ask what it's all about; and, of course, since you were doing all that on purpose, you can't blame me if I do ask, why those old shoes just there, on that table, dearie? But what's all that got to do with it? You'll have to show me now that this Mr. Ponza of ours, that jailbird as you say, or that rascal, that boor, as your father calls him,
brought his mother-in-law to the apartment next to ours with the idea of stringing us all! You've got to show me that he did it on purpose!

DINA. I don't say that he did it on purpose—not at all! But you can't deny that this famous Mr. Ponza has come to this town and done a number of things which are unusual, to say the least; and which he must have known were likely to arouse a very natural curiosity in everybody. Look Nunky, here is a man: he comes to town to fill an important public position, and—what does he do? Where does he go to live? He hires an apartment on the top floor, if you please, of that dirty old tenement out there on the very outskirts of the town. Now, I ask you—did you ever see the place? Inside?

LAUDISI. I suppose you went and had a look at it?

DINA. Yes, Nunky dear, I went—with mamma! And we weren't the only ones, you know. The whole town has been to have a look at it. It's a five-story tenement with an interior court so dark at noon time you can hardly see your hand before your face. Well, there is an iron balcony built out from the fifth story around the courtyard. A basket is hanging from the railing ... They let it up and down—on a rope!

LAUDISI. Well, what of it?

DINA (looking at him with astonished indignation). What of it? Well, there, if you please, is where he keeps his wife!

AMALIA. While her mother lives here next door to us!

LAUDISI. A fashionable apartment, for his mother-in-law, in the residential district!

AMALIA. Generous to the old lady, eh? But he does that to keep her from seeing her daughter!

LAUDISI. How do you know that? How do you know that the old lady, rather, does not prefer this arrangement, just to have more elbow room for herself?

DINA. No, no, Nunky, you're wrong. Everybody knows that it is he who is doing it.

AMALIA. See here, Lamberto, everybody understands, if a girl, when she marries, goes away from her mother to live with her husband in some other town. But supposing this poor mother can't stand being separated from her daughter and follows her to the place, where she herself is also a complete stranger. And supposing now she not only does not live with her daughter, but is even not allowed to see her? I leave it to you ... is that so easy to understand?

LAUDISI. Oh say, you have about as much imagination as so many mud turtles. A mother-in-law and a son-in-law! Is it so hard to suppose that either through her fault or his fault or the fault of both, they should find it hard to get along together and should therefore consider it wiser to live apart?

DINA (with another look of pitying astonishment at her uncle). How stupid of you, Nunky! The trouble is not between the mother-in-law and the son-in-law, but between the mother and the daughter.

LAUDISI. How do you know that?

DINA. Because he is as thick as pudding with the old lady; because they are always together, arm in arm, and as loving as can be. Mother-in-law and son-in-law, if you please! Whoever heard the like of that?

AMALIA. And he comes here every evening to see how the old lady is getting on!

DINA. And that is not the worst of it! Sometimes he comes during the daytime, once or twice!

LAUDISI. How scandalous! Do you think he is making love to the old woman?

DINA. Now don't be improper, uncle. No, we will acquit him of that. She is a poor old lady, quite on her last legs.

AMALIA. But he never, never, never brings his wife! A daughter kept from seeing her mother! The idea!

LAUDISI. Perhaps the young lady is not well; perhaps she isn't able to go out.

DINA. Nonsense! The old lady goes to see her! AMALIA. Exactly! And she never gets in! She can see her only from a distance. Now will you explain to me why, in the name of common sense, that poor mother should be forbidden ever to enter her daughter's house?

DINA. And if she wants to talk to her she has to shout up from the courtyard!

AMALIA. Five stories, if you please!... And her daughter comes out and looks down from the balcony up there. The poor old woman goes into the courtyard and pulls a string that leads up to the balcony; a bell rings; the girl comes out and her mother talks up at her, her head thrown back, just as though she were shouting from out of a well....

(There is a knock at the door and the butler enters).

BUTLER. Callers, madam!

AMALIA. Who is it, please?

BUTLER. Signor Sirelli, and the Signora with another lady, madam.

AMALIA. Very well, show them in.

(The butler bows and withdraws).

SIRELLI, Signora Sirelli, Signora Cini appear in the doorway, rear.

SIRELLI, also a man of about forty, is a bald, fat gentleman with some pretensions to stylish appearance that do not quite succeed: the overdressed provincial.

SIGNORA SIRELLI, his wife, plump, petite, a faded blonde, still young and girlishly pleasing. She, too, is somewhat overdressed with the provincial's fondness for display. She has the aggressive curiosity of the small-town gossip. She is chiefly occupied in keeping her husband in his place.

SIGNORA CINI is the old provincial lady of affected manners, who takes malicious delight in the failings of others, all the while affecting innocence and inexperience regarding the waywardness of mankind.

AMALIA (as the visitors enter, and taking Signora Sirelli's hands effusively). Dearest! Dearest!

SIGNORA SIRELLI. I took the liberty of bringing my good friend, Signora Cini, along. She was so anxious to know you!

AMALIA. So good of you to come, Signora!
LAUDISI. Why no, Signora, now you are wrong. From your husband's point of view things are, I assure you, exactly as he represents them.

SIRELLI. As they are in reality!

SIGNORA SIRELLI. Not at all! You are always wrong.

SIRELLI. No, not a bit of it! It is you who are always wrong. I am always right.

LAUDISI. The fact is that neither of you is wrong. May I explain? I will prove it to you. Now here you are, you, Sirelli, and Signora Sirelli, your wife, there; and here I am. You see me, don't you?

SIRELLI. Well ... er ... yes.

LAUDISI. Do you see me, or do you not?

SIRELLI. Oh, I'll bite! Of course I see you.

LAUDISI. So you see me! But that's not enough. Come here!

SIRELLI (smiling, he obeys, but with a puzzled expression on his face as though he fails to understand what Laudisi is driving at). Well, here I am!

LAUDISI. Yes! Now take a better look at me.... Touch me! That's it—that's it! Now you are touching me, are you not? And you see me! You're sure you see me?

SIRELLI. Yes! I should say....

LAUDISI. Yes, but the point is, you're sure! Of course you're sure! Now if you please, Signora Sirelli, you come here—or rather ... no ... (gallantly) it is my place to come to you! (He goes over to Signora Sirelli and kneels chivalrously on one knee). You see me, do you not, madam? Now that hand of yours ... touch me! A pretty hand, on my word! (He pats her hand).

SIRELLI. Easy! Easy!

LAUDISI. Never mind your husband, madam! Now, you have touched me, have you not? And you see me? And you are absolutely sure about me, are you not? Well now, madam, I beg of you; do not tell your husband, nor my sister, nor my niece, nor Signora Cini here, what you think
of me; because, if you were to do that, they would all tell you that you are completely wrong. But, you see, you are really right; because I am really what you take me to be; though, my dear madam, that does not prevent me from also being really what your husband, my sister, my niece, and Signora Cini take me to be—because they also are absolutely right!

SIGNORA SIRELLI. In other words you are a different person for each of us.

LAUDISI. Of course I'm a different person! And you, madam, pretty as you are, aren't you a different person, too?

SIGNORA SIRELLI (hastily). No sire! I assure you, as far as I'm concerned, I'm always the same always, yesterday, today, and forever!

LAUDISI. Ah, but so am I, from my point of view, believe me! And, I would say that you are all mistaken unless you see me as I see myself; but that would be an inexcusable presumption on my part—as it would be on yours, my dear madam!

SIRELLI. And what has all this rigmarole got to do with it, may I ask?

LAUDISI. What has it got to do with it? Why ... I find all you people here at your wits' ends trying to find out who and what other people are; just as though other people had to be this, or that, and nothing else.

SIGNORA SIRELLI. All you are saying is that we can never find out the truth! A dreadful idea!

SIGNORA CINI. I give up! I give up! If we can't hear you, as far as I'm concerned, I'm always the same always, yesterday, today, and forever!

LAUDISI. No, I refuse to budge! Fact is, I enjoy hearing you gossip; but I promise not to say anything more, don't fear! At the very most, with your permission, I shall indulge in a laugh or two.

SIGNORA SIRELLI. How funny ... and our idea in coming here was to find out.... But really, Amalia, I thought this Ponza man was your husband's secretary at the Provincial building.

AMALIA. He is his secretary—in the office. But here at home what authority has Agazzi over the fellow?

SIGNORA SIRELLI. Of course! I understand! But may I ask ... haven't you even tried to see Signora Frola, next door?

DINA. Tried? I should say we had! Twice, Signora!

SIGNORA CINI. Well ... so then ... you have probably talked to her....

DINA. We were not received, if you please!

SIGNORA SIRELLI, SIRELLI, SIGNORA CINI (in chorus). Not received? Why! Why! Why!

DINA. This very forenoon!

AMALIA. The first time we waited fully fifteen minutes at the door. We rang and rang and rang, and no one came. Why, we weren't even able to leave our cards! So we went back today....

DINA (throwing up her hands in an expression of horror). And he came to the door.

SIGNORA SIRELLI. Why yes, with that face of his ... you can tell by just looking at the man.... Such a face! Such a face! You can't blame people for talking! And then, with that black suit of his.... Why, they all dress in black. Did you ever notice? Even the old lady! And the man's eyes, too!...

SIRELLI (with a glance of pitying disgust at his wife). What do you know about his eyes? You never saw his eyes! And you never saw the woman. How do you know she dresses in black? Probably she dresses in black.... By the way, they come from a little town in the next county. Had you heard that? A village called Marsica!

AMALIA. Yes, the village that was destroyed a short time ago.

SIRELLI. Exactly! By an earthquake! Not a house left standing in the place.

DINA. And all their relatives were lost, I have heard. Not one of them left in the world!

SIGNORA CINI (impatient to get on with the story). Very well, very well, so then ... he came to the door....

AMALIA. Yes.... And the moment I saw him in front of me with that weird face of his I had hardly enough gumption left to tell him that we had just come to call on his mother-in-law, and he ... well ... not a word, not a word ... not even a "thank you," if you please!

DINA. That is not quite fair, mama: he did bow! AMALIA. Well, yes, a bow ... if you want to call it that. Something like this!...

DINA. And his eyes! You ought to see his eyes—the eyes of a devil, and then some! You never saw a man with eyes like that!

SIGNORA CINI. Very well, what did he say, finally?

DINA. He seemed quite taken aback.

AMALIA. He was all confused like; He hitched about for a time; and at last he said that Signora Frola was not feeling well, but that she would appreciate our kindness in having come; and then he just stood there, and stood there, apparently waiting for us to go away.

DINA. I never was more mortified in my life!

SIRELLI. A boor, a plain boor, I say! Oh, it's his fault, I am telling you. And ... who knows? Perhaps he has got the old lady also under lock and key.
SIGNORA SIRELLI. Well, I think something should be done about it!... After all, you are the wife of a superior of his. You can refuse to be treated like that.

AMALIA. As far as that goes, my husband did take it rather badly—as a lack of courtesy on the man's part; and he went straight to the prefect with the matter, insisting on an apology.

Signor Agazzi, commendatore and provincial councillor, appears in the doorway rear.

DINA. Oh, goody, here's papa now!

AGAZZI is well on toward fifty. He has the harsh, authoritarian manner of the provincial of importance. Red hair and beard, rather unkempt; gold-rimmed eyeglasses.

AGAZZI. Oh Sirelli, glad to see you! (He steps forward and bows to the company.

AGAZZI. Signora!... (He shakes hands with Signora Sirelli).

AMALIA (introducing Signora Cini). My husband, Signora Cini!

AGAZZI (with a bow and taking her hand). A great pleasure, madam! (Then turning to his wife and daughter in a mysterious voice): I have come back from the office to give you some real news! Signora Frola will be here shortly.

SIGNORA SIRELLI (clapping her hands delightedly). Oh, the mother-in-law! She is coming? Really? Coming here?

SIGNORA SIRELLI (going over to Agazzi and pressing his hand warmly as an expression of admiration). That's the talk, old man, that's the talk! What's needed here is some show of authority.

AGAZZI. Why I had to, you see, I had to!... I can't let a man treat my wife and daughter that way!...

SIRELLI. I should say not! I was just expressing myself to that effect right here.

SIGNORA SIRELLI. And it would have been entirely proper to inform the prefect also....

AGAZZI (anticipating). ... of all the talk that is going around on this fine gentleman's account? Oh, leave that to me! I didn't miss the opportunity.

SIRELLI. Fine! Fine!

SIGNORA CINI. And such talk!

AMALIA. For my part, I never heard of such a thing. Why, do you know, he has them both under lock and key!

DINA. No, mama, we are not quite sure of that. We are not quite sure about the old lady, yet.

SIRELLI. Well, we know it about his wife, anyway.

SIRELLI. And what did the prefect have to say?

AGAZZI. Oh the prefect ... well, the prefect ... he was very much impressed, very much impressed, with what I had to say.

SIGNORA SIRELLI. I should hope so!

AGAZZI. You see, some of the talk had reached his ears already. And he agrees that it is better, as a matter of his own official prestige, for all this mystery in connection with one of his assistants to be cleared up, so that once and for all we shall know the truth.

LAUDISI. Hah, hah, hah, hah, hah, hah!

AMALIA. That is Lamberto's usual contribution.

He laughs!

AGAZZI. And what is there to laugh about?

SIGNORA SIRELLI. Why he says that no one can ever know the truth.

(Butler appears at the door in back set).

THE BUTLER. Excuse me, Signora Frola! (He steps forward, holding out his hand in greeting.

SIGNORA FROLA. Oh no! No! I have a daughter, Signora Agazzi, as his superior, will be good enough to excuse me and him, too!

AGAZZI. I will be quite frank with you, madam! I wasn't even in town when this thing came. And you are quite alone, aren't you?

SIGNORA SIRELLI. And you are quite alone, aren't you?

SIGNORA FROLA. Oh no! No! I have a daughter, married, though she hasn't been here very long, either.

SIRELLI. And your daughter's husband is the new secretary at the prefecture, Signor Ponza, I believe?

SIGNORA FROLA. Yes, yes, exactly! And I hope that Signor Agazzi, as his superior, will be good enough to excuse me—and him, too!

AGAZZI. It's all right! It's all right! But I do hope you will forgive him. You see, we are still—what shall I say—still so upset by the terrible things that have happened to us....

AMALIA. You went through the earthquake, didn't you?

SIGNORA SIRELLI. And you lost all your relatives?

SIGNORA FROLA. Every one of them! All our family—yes, madam. And our village was left just a miserable ruin, a pile of bricks and stones
SIRELLI. Yes, we heard about it.
SIGNORA FROLA. It wasn't so bad for me, I suppose. I had only one sister and her daughter, and my niece had no family. But my poor son-in-law had a much harder time of it. He lost his mother, two brothers, and their wives, a sister and her husband, and there were two little ones, his nephews.
SIGNORA FROLA. A massacre!
SIGNORA FROLA. Oh, one doesn't forget such things! You see, it sort of leaves you with your feet off the ground.
AMALIA. I can imagine.
SIGNORA SIRELLI. And all over-night with no warning at all! It's a wonder you didn't go mad.
SIGNORA FROLA. Well, you see, we haven't quite gotten our bearings yet; and we do things that may seem impertinent, without in the least intending to. I hope you understand!
AGAZZI. Oh please, Signora Frola, of course!
AMALIA. In fact it was partly on account of your trouble that my daughter and I thought we ought to go to see you first.
SIGNORA SIRELLI (literally writhing with curiosity). Yes, of course, since they saw you all alone by yourself, and yet ... excuse me, Signora Frola ... if the question doesn't seem impertinent ... how is it that when you have a daughter here in town and after a disaster like the one you have been through ... I should think you people would all stand together, that you would need one another.
SIGNORA FROLA. Whereas I am left here all by myself?
SIRELLI. Yes, exactly. If does seem strange, to tell the honest truth.
SIGNORA FROLA. Oh, I understand—of course! But you know, I have a feeling that a young man and a young woman who have married should be left a good deal to themselves.
LAUDISI. Quite so, quite so! They should be left to themselves. They are beginning a life of their own, a life different from anything they have led before. One should not interfere in these relations between a husband and a wife!
SIGNORA SIRELLI. But there are limits to everything, Laudisi, if you will excuse me! And when it comes to shutting one's own mother out of one's life....
LAUDISI. Who is shutting her out of the girl's life? Here, if I have understood the lady, we see a mother who understands that her daughter cannot and must not remain so closely associated with her as she was before, for now the young woman must begin a new life on her own account.
SIGNORA FROLA (with evidence of keen gratitude and relief). You have hit the point exactly, sir. You have said what I would like to have said. You are exactly right! Thank you!
SIGNORA CINI. But your daughter, I imagine, often comes to see you....
SIGNORA FROLA (hesitating, and manifestly ill at ease). Why yes ... I ... I ... we do see each other, of course!
SIRELLI (quickly pressing the advantage). But your daughter never goes out of her house! At least no one in town has ever seen her.
SIGNORA CINI. Oh, she probably has her little ones to take care of.
SIGNORA FROLA (speaking up quickly). No, there are no children yet, and perhaps there won't be any, now. You see, she has been married seven years. Oh, of course, she has a lot to do about the house; but that is not the reason, really. You know, we women who come from the little towns in the country—we are used to staying indoors much of the time.
AGAZZI. Even when your mothers are living in the same town, but not in your house? You prefer staying indoors to going and visiting your mothers?
AMALIA. But it's Signora Frola probably who visits her daughter.
SIGNORA FROLA (quickly). Of course, of course, why not! I go there once or twice a day.
SIRELLI. And once or twice a day you climb all those stairs up to the fifth story of that tenement, eh?
SIGNORA FROLA (growing pale and trying to conceal under a laugh the torture of that cross-examination). Why ... er ... to tell the truth, I don't go up. You're right, five flights would be quite too much for me. No, I don't go up. My daughter comes out on the balcony in the courtyard and ... well ... we see each other ... and we talk!
SIGNORA SIRELLI. And that's all, eh? How terrible! You never see each other more intimately than that?
DINA. I have a mama and certainly I wouldn't expect her to go up five flights of stairs to see me, either; but at the same time I could never stand talking to her that way, shouting at the top of my lungs from a balcony on the fifth story. I am sure I should want a kiss from her occasionally, and feel her near me, at least.
SIGNORA FROLA (with evident signs of embarrassment and confusion). And you're right! Yes, exactly ... quite right! I must explain. Yes ... I hope you people are not going to think that my daughter is something she really is not. You must not suspect her of having so little regard for me and for my years, and you mustn't believe that I, her mother, am ... well ... five, six, even more stories to climb would never prevent a real mother, even if she were as old and infirm as I am, from going to her daughter's side and pressing her to her heart with a real mother's love ... oh no!
SIGNORA SIRELLI (triumphantly). There you have it, there you have it, just as we were saying!
SIGNORA CINI. But there must be a reason, there must be a reason!
AMALIA (pointedly to her brother). Aha, Lamberto, now you see, there is a reason, after all!
SIRELLI (insisting). Your son-in-law, I suppose?
SIGNORA FROLA. Oh please, please, please, don't think badly of him. He is such a very good boy. Good is no name for him, my dear sir. You
can't imagine all he does for me! Kind, attentive, solicitous for my comfort, everything! And as for my daughter—I doubt if any girl ever had a more affectionate and well-intentioned husband. No, on that point I am proud of myself! I could not have found a better man for her.

SIGNORA SIRELLI. Well then.... What? What? What?

SIGNORA CINI. So your son-in-law is not the reason?

AGAZZI. I never thought it was his fault. Can you imagine a man forbidding his wife to call on her mother, or preventing the mother from paying an occasional visit to her daughter?

SIGNORA FROLA. Oh, it's not a case of forbidding! Who ever dreamed of such a thing! No, it's we, Commendatore, I and my daughter, that is. Oh, please, believe me! We refrain from visiting each other of our own accord, out of consideration for him, you understand.

AGAZZI. But excuse me ... how in the world could he be offended by such a thing? I don't understand.

SIGNORA FROLA. An explanation, you call it? So far as I understand; and yet, when you do understand it, it's so hard to explain!... You see, he is in love with my daughter, so much so that he wants her whole heart, her every thought, as it were, for himself; so much so that he insists that the affections which my daughter must have for me, her mother—he finds that love quite natural of course, why not? Of course he does!—should reach me through him—that's it, through him—don't you understand?

AGAZZI. Oh, that is going pretty strong! No, I don't understand. In fact it seems to me a case of downright cruelty!

SIGNORA FROLA. Cruelty? No, no, please don't call it cruelty, Commendatore. It is something else, believe me! You see it's so hard for me to explain the matter. Nature, perhaps ... but no, that's hardly the word. What shall I call it? Perhaps a sort of disease. It's a fullness of love, of a love shut off from the world. There, I guess that's it ... a fullness ... a completeness of devotion in which his wife must live without ever departing from it, and into which no other person must ever be allowed to enter.

DINA. Not even her mother, I suppose?

SIGNORA CINI. It is the worst case of selfishness I ever heard of, if you want my opinion!

SIGNORA FROLA. Selfishness? Perhaps! But a selfishness, after all, which offers itself wholly in sacrifice. A case where the selfish person gives all he has in the world to the one he loves. Perhaps it would be fairer to call me selfish; for selfish it surely is for me to be always trying to break into this closed world of theirs, break in by force if necessary; when I know that my daughter is really so happy, so passionately adored—you ladies understand, don't you? A true mother should be satisfied when she knows her daughter is happy, oughtn't she? Besides I'm not completely separated from my daughter, am I? I see her and I speak to her (She assumes a more confidential tone). You see, when she lets down the basket there in the courtyard I always find a letter in it—a short note, which keeps me posted on the news of the day; and I put in a little letter that I have written. That is some consolation, a great consolation indeed, and now, in course of time, I've grown used to it. I am resigned, there! Resolution, that's it! And I've ceased really to suffer from it at all.

AMALIA. Oh well then, after all, if you people are satisfied, why should....

SIGNORA FROLA (rising). Oh yes, yes! But, remember, I told you he is such a good man! Believe me, he couldn't be better, really! We all have our weaknesses in this world, haven't we? And we get along best by having a little charity, a little indulgence, for one another. (She holds out her hand to Amalia). Thank you for calling, madam. (She bows to Signora Sirelli, Signora Cini, and Dina; then turning to Agazzi, she continues): And I do hope you have forgiven me!

AGAZZI. Oh, my dear madam, please, please! And we are extremely grateful for your having come to call on us.

SIGNORA FROLA (offering her hand to Sirelli and Laudisi and again turning to Amalia who has risen to show her out). Oh no, please, Signora Agazzi, please stay here with your friends! Don't put yourself to any trouble!

AMALIA. No, no, I will go with you; and believe me, we were very, very glad to see you! (Exit Signora Frola with Amalia showing her the way. Amalia returns immediately).

SIGNORA SIRELLI. Well, there you have the story, ladies and gentlemen! Are you satisfied with the explanation?

AGAZZI. An explanation, you call it? So far as I
can see she has explained nothing. I tell you there is some big mystery in all this business.
SIGNORA SIRELLI. That poor woman! Who knows what torment she must be suffering?
DINA. And to think of that poor girl!
SIGNORA CINI. She could hardly keep in her tears as she talked.
AMALIA. Yes, and did you notice when I mentioned all those stairs she would have to climb before really being able to see her daughter?
LAUDISI. What impressed me was her concern, which amounted to a steadfast determination, to protect her son-in-law from the slightest suspicion.
SIGNORA SIRELLI. Not at all, not at all! What could she say for him? She couldn't really find a single word to say for him.
SIRELLI. And I would like to know how anyone could condone such violence, such downright cruelty!
THE BUTLER (appearing again in the doorway).
Beg pardon, sir! Signor Ponza calling.
SIGNORA SIRELLI. The man himself, upon my word!
(An animated ripple of surprise and curiosity, not to say of guilty self-consciousness, sweeps over the company).
AGAZZI. Did he ask to see me?
BUTLER. He asked simply if he might be received. That was all he said.
SIGNORA SIRELLI. Oh please, Signor Agazzi, please let him come in! I am really afraid of the man; but I confess the greatest curiosity to have a close look at the monster.
AMALIA. But what in the world can he be wanting?
AGAZZI. The way to find that out is to have him come in. (To the butler): Show him in, please. (The butler bows and goes out. A second later)
PONZA appears, aggressively; in the doorway. PONZA is a short, thick set, dark complexioned man of a distinctly unprepossessing appearance; black hair, very thick and coming down low over his forehead; a black mustache upcurling at the ends, giving his face a certain ferocity of expression. He is dressed entirely in black. From time to time he draws a black-bordered handkerchief and wipes the perspiration from his brow. When he speaks his eyes are invariably hard, fixed, sinister.)
AGAZZI. This way please, Ponza, come right in! (introducing him): Signor Ponza, our new provincial secretary; my wife; Signora Sirelli; Signora Cini, my daughter Dina. This is Signor Sirelli; and here is Laudisi, my brother-in-law. Please join our party, won't you, Ponza?
PONZA. So kind of you! You will pardon the intrusion. I shall disturb you only a moment, I hope.
AGAZZI. You had some private business to discuss with me?
PONZA. Why yes, but I could discuss it right here. In fact, perhaps as many people as possible should hear what I have to say. You see it is a declaration that I owe, i
AGAZZI. Oh my dear Ponza, if it is that little matter of your mother-in-law's not calling on us, it is quite all right; because you see....
PONZA. No, that was not what I came for, Commendatore. It was not to apologize for her. Indeed I may say that Signora Frola, my wife's mother, would certainly have left her cards with Signora Agazzi, your wife, and Signorina Agazzi, your daughter, long before they were so kind as to honor her with their call, had I not exerted myself to the utmost to prevent her coming, since I am absolutely unable to consent to her passing or receiving visits!
AGAZZI (drawing up into an authoritative attitude and speaking with some severity). Why? if you will be so kind as to explain, Ponza?
PONZA (with evidences of increasing excitement in spite of his efforts to preserve his self-control). I suppose my mother-in-law has been talking to you people about her daughter, my wife. Am I mistaken? And I imagine she told you further that I have forbidden her entering my house and seeing her daughter intimately.
AMALIA. Oh not at all, not at all, Signor Ponza! Signora Frola had only the nicest things to say about you. She could not have spoken of you with greater respect and kindness.
DINA. She seems to be very fond of you indeed.
AGAZZI. She says that she refrains from visiting your house of her own accord, out of regard for feelings of yours which we frankly confess we are unable to understand.
SIGNORA SIRELLI. Indeed, if we were to express our honest opinion....
AGAZZI. Well, yes, why not be honest? We think you are extremely harsh with the woman, extremely harsh, perhaps cruel would be an exacter word.
PONZA. Yes, that is what I thought; and I came here for the express purpose of clearing the matter up. The condition this poor woman is in is a pitiable one indeed—not less pitiable than my own perhaps; because, as you see, I am compelled to come here and make apologies—a public declaration—which only such violence as has just been used upon me could ever bring me to make in the world.... (He stops and looks about the room. Then he says slowly with emphatic emphasis on the important syllables): My mother-in-law, Signora Frola, is not in her right mind! She is insane.
THE COMPANY. Insane! A lunatic! Oh my! Really! No! Impossible!
PONZA. And she has been insane for four years.
SIGNORA SIRELLI. Dear me, who would ever have suspected it! She doesn't show it in the least.
AGAZZI. Insane? Are you sure?
PONZA. She doesn't show it, does she? But she is insane, nevertheless; and her delusion consists precisely in believing that I am forbidding her to see her daughter. (His face takes on an expression of cruel suffering mingled with a sort of ferocious excitement). What daughter, for God's sake? Why her daughter died four years.
PONZA. That is what she says to everybody; and AMALIA. Never in the world! Never!
PONZA. Perhaps it was best f SIRELLI. Are we to PONZA. Four years ago! In fact it was the death of EVERYONE AT ONCE. Died? She is dead? What understand. In the first place I have to maintain illusion in her. The sacrifices you can readily suspect in the world seen her powers of reasoning returned quite clear. you might approach her. She became otherwise quite well, wholly for myself and will not allow anyone com complete in love with her. 

disturbance, she entered on a second obsession, which was the first form of her mental despondency, she was not dead at all; but that I, the poor girl's husband, am so completely in love with her that I want her wholly for myself and will not allow anyone to approach her. She became otherwise quite well, you might say. Her nervousness disappeared. Her physical condition improved, and her powers of reasoning returned quite clear. Judge for yourself, ladies and gentlemen! You have seen her and talked with her. You would never suspect in the world that she is crazy.

AMALIA. Never in the world! Never!

SIGNORA SIRELLI. And the poor woman says she is so happy, so happy!

PONZA. That is what she says to everybody; and for that matter she really has a wealth of affection and gratitude for me; because, as you may well suppose, I do my very best, in spite of the sacrifices entailed, to keep up this beneficial illusion in her. The sacrifices you can readily understand. In the first place I have to maintain two homes on my small salary, Then it is very hard on my wife, isn't it? But she, poor thing, does the very best she can to help me out! She comes to the window when the old lady appears. She talks to her from the balcony. She writes letters to her. But you people will understand that there are limits to what I can ask of my poor wife. Signora Frola, meanwhile, lives practically in confinement. We have to keep a pretty close watch on her. We have to lock her up, virtually. Otherwise, some fine day she would be walking right into my house. She is of a gentle, placid disposition fortunately; but you understand that my wife, good as she is, could never bring herself to accepting caresses intended for another woman, a dead woman! That would be a torment beyond conception.

AMALIA. Oh, of course! Poor woman! Just imagine!

SIGNORA SIRELLI. And the old lady herself consents to being locked up all the time?

PONZA. You, Commendatore, will understand that I couldn't permit her calling here except under absolute constraint.

AGAZZI. I understand perfectly, my dear Ponza, and you have my deepest sympathy.

PONZA. When a man has a misfortune like this fall upon him he must not go about in society; but of course when, by complaining to the prefect, you practically compelled me to have Signora Frola call, it was my duty to volunteer this further information; because, as a public official, and with due regard for the post of responsibility I occupy, I could not allow any incredible suspicions to remain attached to my reputation. I could not have you good people suppose for a moment that, out of jealousy or for any other reason, I could ever prevent a poor suffering mother from seeing her own daughter. (He rises). Again my apologies for having intruded my personal troubles upon your party. (He bows). My compliments, Commendatore.

Good afternoon, good afternoon! Thank you! (Bowing to Laudisi, Sirelli, and the others in turn, he goes out through the door, rear).

AMALIA (with a sigh of sympathy and astonishment). Uhh! Crazy! What do you think of that?

SIGNORA SIRELLI. The poor old thing! But you wouldn't have believed it, would you?

DINA. I always knew there was something under it all.

SIGNORA CINI. But who could ever have guessed...

AGAZZI. Oh, I don't know, I don't know! You could tell from the way she talked....

LAUDISI. You mean to say that you thought...?

AGAZZI. No, I can't say that. But at the same time, if you remember, she could never quite find her words.

SIGNORA SIRELLI. How could she, poor thing, out of her head like that?

SIRELLI. And yet, if I may raise the question, it seems strange to me that an insane person.... oh, I admit that she couldn't really talk rationally.... but what surprises me is her trying to find a reason to explain why her son-in-law should be keeping her away from her daughter. This effort of hers to justify it and then to adapt herself to excuses of her own invention....

AGAZZI. Yes, but that is only another proof that she's insane. You see, she kept offering excuses for Ponza that really were not excuses at all.

AMALIA. Yes, that's so. She would say a thing without really saying it, taking it back almost in the next words.

AGAZZI. But there is one more thing. If she weren't a downright lunatic, how could she or my other woman ever accept such a situation from a man? How could she ever consent to talk with her own daughter only by shouting up from the bottom of a well five stories deep?

SIRELLI. But if I remember rightly she has you there! Notice, she doesn't accept the situation. She says she is resigned to it. That's different! No, I tell you, there is still something funny about this business. What do you say, Laudisi?

LAUDISI. Why, I say nothing, nothing at all!
THE BUTLER (appearing at the door and visibly excited). Beg pardon, Signora Frola is here again!

AMALIA (with a start). Oh dear me, again? Do you suppose she'll be pestering us all the time now?

SIGNORA SIRELLI. I understand how you feel now that you know she's a lunatic.

SIGNORA CINI. My, my, what do you suppose she is going to say now?

SIGNORA FROLA. But I am sure you will forgive AMALIA. My dear Signora Frola, what in the world are you astonished and steps forward (Signora Frola appears at the door. Amalia rises)

SIGNORA FROLA (visibly hurt and quite dismayed). Oh, I know you are saying that just to spare me, just in order not to hurt my feelings.

AGAZZI. Why, yes, he was here! He came to discuss certain office matters with me ... just ordinary business, you understand!

SIGNORA FROLA (with some alarm). But he was quite calm, I hope, quite calm?

SIGNORA SIRELLI. Why, not at all! That was really why he came.

SIGNORA FROLA (with some alarm). (visibly hurt and quite dismayed). Oh, I know you are saying that just to spare me, just in order not to hurt my feelings.

SIGNORA FROLA. Why, my son-in-law, Signor Ponza, has just been here, hasn't he?

SIGNORA SIRELLI. He came to say.

SIGNORA FROLA. Oh, my dear friends, I am sure you are trying to reassure me; but as a matter of fact I came to set you right about my son-in-law.

SIGNORA SIRELLI. Why no, Signora, what's the trouble?

SIGNORA FROLA. But he was quiet, I hope, quiet calm?

SIGNORA SIRELLI. Calm? As calm as could be! Why not? Of course!

SIGNORA FROLA. Oh, my dear friends, I am sure you are trying to reassure me; but as a matter of fact I came to set you right about my son-in-law.

SIGNORA SIRELLI. Why no, Signora, what's the trouble?

SIGNORA FROLA. But he was quiet, I hope, quiet calm?

SIGNORA CINI. My, my, what do you suppose he'll be pestering us all tonight?

SIGNORA SIRELLI. I understand how you feel now that you know she's a lunatic.

AGAZZI. Calm? As calm as could be! Why not? Of course!

SIGNORA SIRELLI. Why, not at all! That was really why he came.

SIGNORA FROLA. Oh, my dear friends, I am sure you are trying to reassure me; but as a matter of fact I came to set you right about my son-in-law.

SIGNORA SIRELLI. Why no, Signora, what's the trouble?

SIGNORA FROLA. But he was quiet, I hope, quiet calm?

SIGNORA CINI. My, my, what do you suppose he'll be pestering us all tonight?

SIGNORA SIRELLI. I understand how you feel now that you know she's a lunatic.

SIGNORA CINI. My, my, what do you suppose she is going to say now?

SIGNORA FROLA. But I can tell from the way you all look at me... Please excuse me, but it is not a question of me at all. From the way you all look at me I can tell that he came here to prove something that I would never have confessed for all the money in the world. You will all bear me out, won't you? When I came here a few moments ago you all asked me questions that were very cruel questions to me, as I hope you will understand. And they were questions that I couldn't answer very well; but anyhow I gave an explanation of our manner of living which can be satisfactory to nobody, I am well aware. But how could I give you the real reason? How could I tell you people, as he's doing, that my daughter has been dead for four years and that I'm a poor, insane mother who believes that her daughter is still living and that her husband will not allow me to see her?

SIGNORA FROLA (quite upset by the ring of deep sincerity he finds in Signora Frola's manner of speaking). What do you mean, your daughter?

SIGNORA FROLA. (hastily and with anguished dismay written on her features). You know that's so. Why do you try to deny it? He did say that to you, didn't he?

SIGNORA FROLA. I know he did; and I also know how it pained him to be obliged to say such a thing of me. It is a great pity, Commendatore! We have made continual sacrifices, involving unheard of suffering, I assure you; and we could endure them only by living as we are living now. Unfortunately, as I well understand, it must look very strange to people, seem even scandalous, arouse no end of gossip! But after all, if he is an excellent secretary, scrupulously honest, attentive to his work, why should people complain? You have seen him in the office, haven't you? He is a good worker, isn't he?

SIGNORA FROLA. To tell the truth, I have not watched him particularly, as yet.

SIGNORA FROLA. Oh he really is, he really is! All the men he ever worked for say he's most reliable; and I beg of you, please don't let this other matter interfere. And why then should people go tormenting him with all this prying into his private life, laying bare once more a misfortune which he has succeeded in mastering and which, if it were widely talked about, might upset him again personally, and even hurt him in his career?

AGAZZI. Oh no, no, Signora, no one is trying to hurt him. It is nothing to his disgrace that I can see. Nor would we hurt you either.

SIGNORA FROLA. But my dear sir, how can you help hurting me when you force him to give almost publicly an explanation which is quite
SIGNORA FROLA. No, look, look, not that, not
SIRELLI. I always said it was he!...
SIGNORA FROLA. God forbid! Of course she is
AGAZZI. What do you mean? Do you mean that
SIGNORA SIRELLI. Well, well, well, so then it's
AGAZZI. Oh, I say! Is that really possible?
SIGNORA SIRELLI. Ah, so that is why he says
AGAZZI. Yes, that is quite true. He did seem very
SIGNORA FROLA. (joining her hands beseecingly). My dear friends, what are you
really thinking? It is only on this subject that he
is a little queer. The point is, you must simply
not mention this particular matter to him. Why,
really now, you could never suppose that I would
leave my daughter shut up with him all alone
like that? And yet just watch him at his work and
in the office. He does everything he is expected
to do and no one in the world could do it better.
AGAZZI. But this is not enough, madam, as you
will understand. Do you mean to say that Signor
Ponza, your son-in-law, came here and made up
a story out of whole cloth?
SIGNORA FROLA. Yes, sir, yes sir, exactly ...
only I will explain. You must understand—you
must look at things from his point of view.
AGAZZI. What do you mean? Do you mean that
your daughter is not dead?
SIGNORA FROLA. God forbid! Of course she is
not dead!
AGAZZI. Well, then, he is the lunatic!
SIGNORA FROLA. No, no, look, look!...
SIRELLI. I always said it was he!...
SIGNORA FROLA. No, look, look, not that, not
that! Let me explain.... You have noticed him,
haven't you? Fine, strong looking man. Well,
when he married my daughter you can imagine
how fond he was of her. But alas, she fell sick
with a contagious disease; and the doctors had to
separate her from him. Not only from him, of
course, but from all her relatives. They're all
dead now, poor things, in the earthquake, you
understand. Well, he just refused to have her
taken to the hospital; and he got so over-wrought
that they actually had to put him under restraint;
and he broke down nervously as the result of it
all and he was sent to a sanatorium. But my
daughter got better very soon, while he got
worse and worse. He had a sort of obsession that
his wife had died in the hospital, that perhaps
they had killed her there; and you couldn't get
that idea out of his head.
Just imagine when we brought my daughter back
to him quite recovered from her illness—and a
pretty thing she was to look at, too—he began to
scream and say, no, no, no, she wasn't his wife,
his wife was dead! He looked at her: No, no, no,
not at all! She wasn't the woman! Imagine
my dear friends, how terrible it all was. Finally he
came up close to her and for a moment it seemed
that he was going to recognize her again; but
once more it was "No, no, no, she is not my
wife!" And do you know, to get him to accept
my daughter at all again, we were obliged to
pretend having a second wedding, with the
collusion of his doctors and his friends, you
understand!
SIGNORA SIRELLI. Ah, so that is why he says
that....
SIGNORA FROLA. Yes, but he doesn't really
believe it, you know; and he hasn't for a long
time, I am sure. But he seems to feel a need for
maintaining the pretense. He can't do without it.
He feels surer of himself that way. He is seized
with a terrible fear, from time to time, that this
little wife he loves may be taken from him again.
(Smiling and in a low, confidential tone): So he
keeps her locked up at home where he can have
her all for himself. But he worships her—he
worships her; and I am really quite convinced
that my daughter is one of the happiest women
in the world. (She gets up). And now I must be
going. You see, my son-in-law is in a terrible
state of mind at present. I wouldn't like to have
him call, and find me not at home. (With a sigh,
and gesturing with her joined hands): Well, I
suppose we must get along as best we can; but it
is hard on my poor girl. She has to pretend all
along that she is not herself, but another, his
second wife; and I ... oh, as for me, I have to
pretend that I am a lunatic when he's around, my
dear friends; but I'm glad to, I'm glad to, really,
so long as it does him some good. (The ladies
rise as she steps nearer to the door). No, no,
don't let me interrupt your party. I know the way
out! Good afternoon! Good afternoon!
(Bowing and smiling, she goes out through the rear
door. The others stands there in silence, looking at
each other with blank astonishment on their faces).
LAUDISI (coming forward). So you want the
truth, eh? The truth! The truth! Hah! hah! hah!
— hah! hah! hah! hah!
Curtain.

ACT II
Councillor Agazzi's study in the same house.
Antique furnishings with old paintings on the
walls. A portière over the rear entrance and over
the door to the left which opens into the drawing
room shown in the first act. To the right a
substantial fireplace with a big mirror above the
mantel. A flat top desk with a telephone. A sofa,
armchairs, straight back chairs, etc.
As the curtain rises Agazzi is shown standing
beside his desk with the telephone receiver pressed
to his ear. Laudisi end Sirelli sit looking at him
expectantly.
AGAZZI. Yes, I want Centuri. Hello ... hello ...
Centuri? Yes, Agazzi speaking. That you,
Centuri? It's me, Agazzi. Well? (He listens for
some time). What's that? Really? (Again he
listens at length). I understand, but you might go
at the matter with a little more speed... (Another long pause). Well, I give up! How can that possibly be? (A pause). Oh, I see, I see.... (Another pause). Well, never mind, I'll look into it myself: Goodbye, Centuri, goodbye! (He lays down the receiver and steps forward on the stage).

SIRELLI (eagerly). Well?
AGAZZI. Nothing! Absolutely nothing!
SIRELLI. Nothing at all?
AGAZZI. You see the whole blamed village was wiped out. Not a house left standing! In the collapse of the town hall, followed by a fire, all the records of the place seem to have been lost—births, deaths, marriages, everything.
SIRELLI. But not everybody was killed. They ought to be able to find somebody who knows them.
AGAZZI. Yes, but you see they didn't rebuild the place. Everybody moved away, and no record was ever kept of the people, of course. So far they have found nobody who knows the Ponzas. To be sure, if the police really went at it, they might find somebody; but it would be a tough job.
SIRELLI. So we can't get anywhere along that line! We have got to take what they say and let it go at that.
AGAZZI. That, unfortunately, is the situation.
LAUDISI (rising). Well, you fellows take a piece of advice from me: believe them both!
AGAZZI. What do you mean—"believe them both"?....
SIRELLI. But if she says one thing, and he says another....
LAUDISI. Well, in that case, you needn't believe either of them!
SIRELLI. Oh, you're just joking. We may not be able to verify the stories; but that doesn't prove that either one or the other may not be telling the truth. Some document or other....
LAUDISI. Oh, documents! Documents! Suppose you had them? What good would they do you?
AGAZZI. Oh, I say! Perhaps we can't get them now, but there were such documents once. If the old lady is the lunatic, there was, as there still may be somewhere, the death certificate of the daughter. Or look at it from the other angle: if we found all the records, and the death certificate were not there for the simple reason that it never existed, why then, it's Ponza, the son-in-law. He would be the lunatic.
SIRELLI. You mean to say you wouldn't give in if we stuck that certificate under your nose tomorrow or the next day? Would you still deny....
LAUDISI. Deny? Why ... why ... I'm not denying anything! In fact, I'm very careful not to be denying anything. You're the people who are looking up the records to be able to affirm or deny something. Personally, I don't give a rap for the documents; for the truth in my eyes is not a matter of black and white, but a matter of those two people. And into their minds I can penetrate only through what they say to me of themselves.
SIRELLI. Very well—She says he's crazy and he says she's crazy. Now one of them must be crazy. You can't get away from that. Well which is it, she or he?
AGAZZI. There, that's the way to put it!
LAUDISI. But just observe; in the first place, it isn't true that they are accusing each other of insanity. Ponza, to be sure, says his mother-in-law is insane. She denies this, not only of herself, but also of him. At the most, she says that he was a little off once, when they took her daughter from him; but that now he is quite all right.
SIRELLI. I see! So you're rather inclined, as I am, to trust what the old lady says.
AGAZZI. The fact is, indeed, that if you accept his story, all the facts in the case are explained.
LAUDISI. But all the facts in the case are explained if you take her story, aren't they?
SIRELLI. Oh, nonsense! In that case neither of them would be crazy! Why, one of them must be, damn it all!
LAUDISI. Well, which one? You can't tell, can you? Neither can anybody else! And it is not because those documents you are looking for have been destroyed in an accident—a fire, an earthquake—what you will; but because those people have concealed those documents in themselves, in their own souls. Can't you understand that? She has created for him, or he for her, a world of fancy which has all the earmarks of reality itself. And in this fictitious reality they get along perfectly well, and in full accord with each other; and this world of fancy, this reality of theirs, no document can possibly destroy because the air they breathe is of that world. For them it is something they can see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and touch with their fingers. Oh, I grant you—if you could get a death certificate or a marriage certificate or something of the kind, you might be able to satisfy that stupid curiosity of yours. Unfortunately, you can't get it. And the result is that you are in the extraordinary fix of having before you, on the one hand, a world of fancy, and on the other, a world of reality, and you, for the life of you, are not able to distinguish one from the other.
AGAZZI. Philosophy, my dear boy, philosophy! And I have no use for philosophy. Give me facts, if you please! Facts! So, I say, keep at it; and I'll bet you we get to the bottom of it sooner or later.
SIRELLI. First we got her story and then we got his; and then we got a new one from her. Let's bring the two of them together—and you think that then we won't be able to tell the false from the true?
LAUDISI. Well, bring them together if you want to! All I ask is permission to laugh when you're through.
AGAZZI. Well, we'll let you laugh all you want. In the meantime let's see.... (He steps to the door at the left and calls): Amalia, Signora Sirelli, won't you come in here a moment?

(The ladies enter with Dina).
SIGNORA SIRELLI (catching sight of Laudisi and shaking a finger at him). But how is it a man like
you, in the presence of such an extraordinary situation, can escape the curiosity we all feel to get at the bottom of this mystery? Why, I lie awake nights thinking of it!

AGAZZI. As your husband says, that man's impossible! Don't bother about him, Signora Sirelli.

LAUDISI. No, don't bother with me; you just listen to Agazzi! He'll keep you from lying awake tonight.

AGAZZI. Look here, ladies. This is what I want—I have an idea: won't you just step across the hall to Signora Frola's?

AMALIA. But will she come to the door?

AGAZZI. Oh, I imagine she will!

DINA. We're just returning the call, you see....

AMALIA. But didn't he ask us not to call on his mother-in-law? Hasn't he forbidden her to receive visits?

SIRELLI. No, not exactly! That's how he explained it to me. But didn't he ask us not to call on his mother-in-law? Hasn't he forbidden her to receive visits?

AGAZZI. As your husband says, that man's impossible! Don't bother about him, Signora Sirelli.

AMALIA. But didn't he ask us not to call on his mother-in-law? Hasn't he forbidden her to receive visits?

SIRELLI. But just a moment. Where do I come in?

AGAZZI. Oh, find some excuse! You'll think of something in the course of your talk; and if you don't, there's Dina and Signora Sirelli. But when you come back, you understand, go into the drawing room. (He steps to the door on the left, makes sure that it is wide open, and draws aside the portiere). This door must stay open, wide open, so that we can hear you talking from in here. Now, here are some papers that I ought to take with me to the office. However, I forget them here. It is a brief that requires Ponza's immediate personal attention. So then, I forget it. And when I get to the office I have to bring him back here to find them—See?

SIRELLI. But just a moment. Where do I come in?

AGAZZI. When am I expected to appear?

SIRELLI. Yes, right away. Goodbye, Lamberto!

LAUDISI. Goodbye, good luck, good luck! (Agazzi and Sirelli leave. Laudisi, left alone, walks up and down the study a number of times, nodding his head and occasionally smiling. Finally he draws up in front of the big mirror that is hanging over the mantelpiece. He sees himself in the glass, stops, and addresses his image).

LAUDISI. So there you are! (He bows to himself and salutes, touching his forehead with his fingers). I say, old man, who is the lunatic, you or I? (He levels a finger menacingly at his image in the glass; and, of course, the image in turn levels a finger at him. As he smiles, his image smiles). Of course, I understand! I say it's you, and you say it's me. You—you are the lunatic! No! It's me! Very well! It's me! Have it your way. Between you and me, we get along very well, don't we! But the trouble is, others don't think of you just as I do; and that being the case, old man, what a fix you're in! As for me, I say that here, right in front of you, I can see myself with my eyes and touch myself with my fingers. But what are you for other people? What are you in their eyes? An image, my dear sir, just an image in the glass! "What fools these mortals be!" as old Shakespeare said. They're all carrying just such a phantom around inside themselves, and here they are racking their brains about the phantoms in other people; and they think all that is quite another thing!

(The butler has entered the room in time to catch Laudisi gesticulating at himself in the glass. He wonders if the man is crazy. Finally he speaks up):

BUTLER. Ahem!... Signor Laudisi, if you please....

LAUDISI (coming to himself). Uff!

BUTLER. Two ladies calling, sir! Signora Cini and another lady!

LAUDISI. Calling to see me?

BUTLER. Really, they asked for the signora; but I
SIGNORA CINI. Yes, we thought as much.

LAUDISI. Oh, she will be back very soon, and

SIGNORA CINI. Of Signora Frola?

LAUDISI. Please, please, this way, madam!

SIGNORA CINI. May I come in?

LAUDISI. Ah, in that case you are right! (Turning to the image in the glass). You are not the brother of Signora Agazzi? No, it's me! (To the butler): Right you are! Tell them I am in. And show them in here, won't you? (The butler retires).

SIGNORA CINI. May I come in?

LAUDISI. Please, please, this way, madam!

SIGNORA CINI. I was told Signora Agazzi was not at home, and I brought Signora Nenni along. Signora Nenni is a friend of mine, and she was most anxious to make the acquaintance of....

LAUDISI. ... of Signora Frola?

SIGNORA CINI. Of Signora Agazzi, your sister! LAUDISI. Oh, she will be back very soon, and Signora Frola will be here, too.

SIGNORA CINI. Yes, we thought as much.

SIGNORA NENNI. All of us women in town said it was he. We always said so!

SIGNORA CINI. But how did you get at it? I suppose Signor Agazzi ran down the documents, didn't he—the birth certificate, or something?

SIGNORA NENNI. Through the prefect, of course! There was no getting away from those people. Once the police start investigating....!

LAUDISI (motions to them to come closer to him; then in a low voice and in the same mysterious manner, and stressing each syllable). The certificate!—Of the second marriage!

SIGNORA CINI (starting back with astonishment). What?

SIGNORA NENNI (Likewise taken aback). What did you say? The second marriage?

SIGNORA CINI. Well, in that case he was right.

LAUDISI. Oh, documents, ladies, documents! This certificate of the second marriage, so it seems, talks as plain as day.

SIGNORA NENNI. Well, then, she is the lunatic.

LAUDISI. Right you are! She it is!

SIGNORA CINI. But I thought you said....

LAUDISI. Yes, I did say ... but this certificate of the second marriage may very well be, as Signora Frola said, a fictitious document, gotten up through the influence of Ponza's doctors and friends to pamper him in the notion that his wife was not his first wife, but another woman.

SIGNORA CINI. But it's a public document. You mean to say a public document can be a fraud?

LAUDISI. I mean to say—well, it has just the value that each of you chooses to give it. For instance, one could find somewhere, possibly, those letters that Signora Frola said she gets from her daughter, who lets them down in the basket in the courtyard. There are such letters, aren't there?

SIGNORA CINI. Yes, of course!

LAUDISI. They are documents, aren't they? Aren't letters documents? But it all depends on how you read them. Here comes Ponza, and he says they are just made up to pamper his mother-in-law in her obsession....
SIGNORA CINI. Oh, dear, dear, so then we're never sure about anything?
LAUDISI. Never sure about anything? Why not at all, not at all! Let's be exact. We are sure of many things, aren't we? How many days are there in the week? Seven—Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday,... How many months in the year are there? Twelve: January, February, March,...
SIGNORA CINI. Oh, I see, you're just joking! You're just joking! (Dina appears, breathless, in the doorway, at the rear).
DINA. Oh, Nunky, won't you please.... (She stops at the sight of Signora Cini). Oh, Signora Cini, you here?
SIGNORA CINI. Why, I just came to make a call!...
LAUDISI. ... with Signora Cenni.
SIGNORA NENNI. No, my name is Nenni.
LAUDISI. Oh yes, pardon me! She was anxious to make Signora Frola's acquaintance....
SIGNORA NENNI. Why, not at all!
SIGNORA CINI. He has just been making fun of us! You ought to see what fools he made of us!
DINA. Oh, he's perfectly insufferable, even with mamma and me. Will you excuse me for just a moment? No, everything is all right. I'll just run back and tell mamma that you people are here and I think that will be enough. Oh, Nunky, if you had only heard her talk! Why, she is a perfect dear; and what a good, kind soul!... She showed us all those letters her daughter wrote....
SIGNORA CINI. Yes, but as Signor Laudisi was just saying....
DINA. He hasn't even seen them!
SIGNORA NENNI. You mean they are not really fictitious?
DINA. Fictitious nothing! They talk as plain as day. And such things! You can't fool a mother when her own daughter talks to her. And you know—the letter she got yesterday!... (She stops at the sound of voices coming into the study from the drawing room). Oh, here they are, here they are, already! (She goes to the door and peeps into the room).
SIGNORA CINI (following her to the door). Is she there, too?
DINA. Yes, but you had better come into the other room. All of us women must be in the drawing room. And it is just eleven o'clock, Nunky!
AMALIA (entering with decision from the door on the left). I think this whole business is quite unnecessary! We have absolutely no further need of proofs....
DINA. Quite so! I thought of that myself: Why bring Ponza here?
AMALIA (taken somewhat aback by Signora Cinis presence). Oh, my dear Signora Cini....
SIGNORA CINI (introducing Signora Nenni). A friend of mine, Signora Nenni! I ventured to bring her with me....
AMALIA (bowing, but somewhat coolly, to the visitor). A great pleasure, Signora! (After a pause). There is not the slightest doubt in the world ... it's he!
SIGNORA CINI. It's he? Are you sure it's he?
DINA. And such a trick on the poor old lady!
AMALIA. Trick is not the name for it! It is downright dishonest!
LAUDISI. Oh, I agree with you: it's outrageous! Quite! So much so, I'm quite convinced it must be she!
AMALIA. She? What do you mean? How can you say that?
LAUDISI. I say, it is she, it is she, it's she!
AMALIA. Oh, I say! If you had heard her talk....!
DINA. It is absolutely clear to us now.
SIGNORA CINI and SIGNORA NENNI (swallowing). Really? You are sure?
LAUDISI. Exactly! Now that you are sure it's he, why, obviously—it must be she.
DINA. Oh dear me, why talk to that man? He is just impossible!
AMALIA. Well, we must go into the other room.... This way, if you please! (Signora Cini, Signora Nenni and Amalia withdraw through the door on the left. Dina starts to follow, when Laudisi calls her back).
LAUDISI. Dina!
DINA. I refuse to listen to you! I refuse!
LAUDISI. I was going to suggest that, since the whole matter is closed, you might close the door also.
DINA. But papa ... he told us to leave it open. Ponza will be here soon; and if papa finds it closed—well, you know how papa is!
LAUDISI. But you can convince him!... You especially. You can show him that there really was no need of going any further. You are convinced yourself, aren't you?
DINA. I am as sure of it, as I am that I'm alive!
LAUDISI (putting her to the test with a smile).
Well, close the door then!
DINA. I see, you're trying to make me say that I'm not really sure. Well, I won't close the door, but it's just on account of papa.
LAUDISI. Shall I close it for you?
DINA. If you take the responsibility yourself!...
LAUDISI. But you see, I am sure! I know that Ponza is the lunatic!
DINA. The thing for you to do is to come into the other room and just hear her talk a while. Then you'll be sure, absolutely sure. Coming?
LAUDISI. Yes, I'm coming, and I'll close the door behind me—on my own responsibility, of course.
DINA. Ah, I see. So you're convinced even before you hear her talk.
LAUDISI. No, dear, it's because I'm sure that your papa, who has been with Ponza, is just as certain as you are that any further investigation is unnecessary.
DINA. How can you say that?
LAUDISI. Why, of course, if you talk with Ponza, you're sure the old lady is crazy. (He walks resolutely to the door). I am going to shut this door.
DINA (restraining him nervously, then hesitating a moment). Well, why not ... if you're really sure? What do you say—let's leave it open!
LAUDISI. Hah! hah! hah! hah! hah! hah! hah!
DINA. But just because papa told us to!
LAUDISI. And papa will tell you something else by and by. Say ... let's leave it open! (A piano starts playing in the adjoining room—an ancient tune, full of soft and solemn melody; the "Nina" of Pergolesi).

DINA. Oh, there she is. She's playing! Do you hear? Actually playing the piano!

LAUDISI. The old lady?

DINA. Yes! And you know? She told us that her daughter used to play this tune, always the same tune. How well she plays! Come! Come! (They hurry through the door).

The stage, after the exit of Laudisi and Dina, remains empty for a space of time while the music continues from the other room. Ponza, appearing at the door with Agazzi, catches the concluding notes and his face changes to a somewhat startled expression of astonishment comes into his face). Ah!

PONZA (going to the door also. On looking into the next room he can hardly restrain his emotion). In the name of God, is she playing?

AGAZZI. Yes—Signora Frola! And how well she does play!

PONZA. How is this? You people have brought her in here, again! And you're letting her play!

AGAZZI. Why not? What's the harm?

PONZA. Oh, please, please, no, not that song! It is the one her daughter used to play.

AGAZZI. Ah, I see! And it hurts you?

PONZA. Oh, no, not me—but her—it hurts her—and you don't know how much! I thought I had made you and those women understand just how that poor old lady was!

AGAZZI. Yes, you did ... quite true! But you see ... but see here, Ponza! (trying to pacify the man's growing emotion).

PONZA (continuing). But you must leave her alone! You must not go to her house! She must not come in here! I am the only person who can deal with her. You are killing her ... killing her!

AGAZZI. No, I don't think so. It is not so bad as that. My wife and daughter are surely tactful enough.... (Suddenly the music ceases. There is a burst of applause).

AGAZZI. There, you see. Listen! Listen! (From the next room the following conversation is distinctly heard).

DINA. Why, Signora Frola, you are perfectly marvellous at the piano!

SIGNORA FROLA. But you should hear how my Lena plays!

PONZA (digs his nails into his hands).

SIGNORA FROLA. Her daughter, of course!

PONZA. Didn't you hear? "How my Lena plays! How my Lena plays!"

AGAIN FROM THE INSIDE.

SIGNORA FROLA. Oh, no, not now!... She hasn't played for a long time—since that happened.

PONZA. And you know, it is what she takes hardest, poor girl!

AGAZZI. Why, that seems quite natural to me! Of course, she thinks the girl is still alive!

PONZA. But she shouldn't be allowed to say such things. She must not—she must not say such things! Didn't you hear? "She hasn't played since that happened!" She said "she hasn't played since that happened!" Talking of the piano, you understand! Oh, you don't understand, no, of course! My first wife had a piano and played that tune. Oh, oh, oh! You people are determined to ruin me!

(Sirelli appears at the back door at this moment, and hearing the concluding words of Ponza and noticing his extreme exasperation, stops short, uncertain as to what to do. Agazzi is himself very much affected and motions to Sirelli to come in).

AGAZZI. Why, no, my dear fellow, I don't see any reason.... (To Sirelli). Won't you just tell the ladies to come in here?

(Sirelli, keeping at a safe distance from Ponza, goes to the door at the left and calls).

PONZA. The ladies in here? In here with me? Oh, no, no, please, rather.... (At a signal from Sirelli, who stands in the doorway to the left, his face taut with intense emotion, the ladies enter. They all show various kinds and degrees of excitement and emotion. Signora Frola appears, and catching sight of Ponza in the condition he is in, stops, quite overwhelmed. As he assails her during the lines that follow, she changes glances of understanding from time to time with the ladies about her. The action here is rapid, nervous, tense with excitement, and extremely violent).

PONZA. You? Here? How is this? You! Here! Again! What are you doing here?

SIGNORA FROLA. Why, I just came ... don't be cross!

PONZA. You came here to tell these ladies.... What did you tell these ladies?

SIGNORA FROLA. Nothing! I swear to God, nothing!

PONZA. Nothing? What do you mean, nothing? I heard you with my own ears, and this gentleman here heard you also. You said "she plays". Who plays? Lena plays! And you know very well that Lena has been dead for four years. Dead, do you
SIGNORA FROLA. Yes, yes, I know... Don't get excited, my dear... Oh, yes, oh yes. I know... PONZA. And you said "she hasn't been able to play since that happened". Of course she hasn't been able to play since that happened. How could she, if she's dead? SIGNORA FROLA. Why, of course, certainly. Isn't that what I said? Ask these ladies. I said that she hasn't been able to play since that happened. Of course. How could she, if she's dead? PONZA. And why were you worrying about that piano, then? SIGNORA FROLA. No, no! I'm not worrying about any piano.... PONZA. I broke that piano up and destroyed it. You know that, the moment your daughter died, to keep this second wife of mine from playing on it. For that matter you know that this second woman never plays. SIGNORA FROLA. Why, of course, dear! Of course! She doesn't know how to play! PONZA. And one thing more: Your daughter was Lena, wasn't she? Her name was Lena. Now, see here! You just tell these people what my second wife's name is. Speak up! You know very well what her name is! What is it? What is it? SIGNORA FROLA. Her name is Julia! Yes, yes, of course, my dear friends, her name is Julia! (Winks at someone in the company). PONZA. Exactly! Her name is Julia, and not Lena! Who are you winking at? Don't you go trying to suggest by those winks of yours that she's not Julia! SIGNORA FROLA. Why, what do you mean? I wasn't winking! Of course I wasn't! PONZA. I saw you! I saw you very distinctly! You are trying to ruin me! You are trying to make these people think that I am keeping your daughter all to myself, just as though she were not dead. (He breaks into convulsive sobbing) ... just as though she were not dead! SIGNORA FROLA (hurrying forward and speaking with infinite kindness and sympathy). Oh no! Come, come, my poor boy. Come! Don't take it so hard. I never said any such thing, did I, madam! AMALIA, SIGNORA SIRELLI, DINA. Of course she never said such a thing! She always said the girl was dead! Yes! Of course! No! SIGNORA FROLA. I did, didn't I? I said she's dead, didn't I? And that you are so very good to me. Didn't I, didn't I? I, trying to ruin you? I, trying to get you into trouble? PONZA. And you, going into other people's houses where there are pianos, playing your daughter's tunes on them! Saying that Lena plays them that way, or even better! SIGNORA FROLA. No, it was ... why ... you see ... it was ... well ... just to see whether.... PONZA. But you can't ... you mustn't! How could you ever dream of trying to play a tune that your dead daughter played! SIGNORA FROLA. You are quite right!.... Oh, yes! Poor boy! Poor boy! (She also begins to weep). I'll never do it again: Never, never, never again! PONZA (advancing upon her threateningly). What are you doing here? Get out of here! Go home at once! Home! Home! Go home! SIGNORA FROLA. Yes, Yes! Home! I am going home! Oh dear, oh dear! (She backs out the rear door; looking beseechingly). PONZA. You are quite right!... Oh, yes! Poor boy! Poor boy! (She also begins to weep). I'll never do it again: Never, never, never again! PONZA (advancing upon her threateningly). What are you doing here? Get out of here! Go home at once! Home! Home! Go home! SIGNORA FROLA. Yes, Yes! Home! I am going home! Oh dear, oh dear! (She backs out the rear door; looking beseechingly at the company, as though urging everyone to have pity on her son-in-law. She retires, sobbing. The others stand there looking at Ponza with pity and terror; but the moment Signora Frola has left the room, he regains his normal composure, an air of despairing melancholy, and he says coolly, but with profound seriousness): PONZA. I hope you good people will excuse me for this scene. A scene it really was, I suppose! But how could I avoid it? I had to rave like that to repair the damage which you good people, with the best of intentions, and surely without dreaming what you are really doing, have done to this unfortunate woman. AGAZZI (in astonishment). What do you mean? That you were just acting? You were pretending all that? PONZA. Of course I was! Don't you people understand that I had to? The only way to keep her in her obsession is for me to shout the truth that way, as though I myself had gone mad, as though I were the lunatic! Understand? But please forgive me. I must be going now. I must go in and see how she is. (He hurries out through the rear door. The others stand where they are in blank amazement). LAUDISI (coming forward). And there, ladies and gentlemen, you have the truth! Hah! hah! hah; hah; hah; hah! hah! Curtain.

ACT III
The same scene. As the curtain rises, Laudisi is sprawling in an easy chair, reading a book.
Through the door that leads into the parlor on the left comes the confused murmur of many voices.
The butler appears in the rear door, introducing the police commissioner, CENTURI. CENTURI is a tall, stiff, scowling official, with a decidedly professional air. He is in the neighborhood of forty. THE BUTLER. This way, sir. I will call Signor Agazzi at once.
LAUDISI (drawing himself up in his chair and looking around). Oh, it's you, Commissioner! (He rises hastily and recalls the butler; who has stepped out through the door). One moment, please! Wait! (To Centuri). Anything new, Commissioner?
COMMISSIONER (stiffly). Yes, something new! LAUDISI. Ah! Very well. (To the butler): Never mind. I'll call him myself. (He motions with his hand toward the door on the left. The butler bows and withdraws).
You have worked miracles, Commissioner! You're the savior of this town. Listen! Do you hear them? You are the lion of the place! How does it feel to be the father of your country? But say, what you've discovered is all solid fact?
COMMISSIONER. We've managed to unearth a
LAUDISI. From Ponza's town? People who know all about him?

COMMISSIONER. Yes! And we have gathered from them a few facts,—not many, perhaps, but well authenticated.

LAUDISI. Ah, that's nice. Congratulations! For example....

COMMISSIONER. For example? Why, for instance, here... well, here are all the communications I have received. Read 'em yourself!

(From an inner pocket he draws a yellow envelope, opened at one end, from which he takes a document and hands it to Laudisi).

LAUDISI. Interesting, I am sure. Very interesting!...

(He stands, reading the document carefully, commenting from time to time with exclamations in different tones. First an "ah" of satisfaction, then another "ah" which attenuates this enthusiasm very much. Finally an "eh" of disappointment, which leads to another "eh" of complete disgust).

Why, no, what's all this amount to, Commissioner?

COMMISSIONER. Well, it's what we were able to find out.

LAUDISI. But this doesn't prove anything, you understand! It leaves everything just where it was. There's nothing of any significance whatever here. (He looks at the commissioner for a moment and then, as though suddenly making up his mind, he says): I wonder, Commissioner, would you like to do something really great—render a really distinguished service to this town; and meanwhile lay up a treasure in heaven?

COMMISSIONER (looking at him in perplexity). What are you thinking of sir?

LAUDISI. I'll explain. Here, please, take this chair! (He sets the chair in front of Agazzi's desk). I advise you, Mr. Commissioner, to tear up this sheet of paper that you've brought and which has absolutely no significance at all. But here on this other piece of paper, why don't you write down something that will be precise and clear?

COMMISSIONER. Why... why... myself? What do you mean? What should I write?

LAUDISI. Anything, anything at all! Anything that comes into your head, provided, however, it be precise and clear! Say, for instance, that Signora Frola is a lunatic, or, if you will, if you prefer, that the second marriage of Ponza's was a frame-up!

COMMISSIONER. I don't get you, Signor Laudisi. What are you driving at? I forge the document?

LAUDISI (insisting). Forgive! Just say something—anything—that these two old acquaintances of Ponza's whom you managed to get hold of might have said. Come, Commissioner, rise to the occasion! Do something for the commonwealth! Bring this town back to normal again! Don't you see what they are after? They all want the truth—a truth, that is: Something specific; something concrete! They don't care what it is. All they want is something categorical, something that speaks plainly! Then they'll quiet down.

COMMISSIONER. The truth—a truth? Excuse me, have I understood you clearly? You were suggesting that I commit a forgery? I am astonished that you dare propose such a thing, and when I say I am astonished, I'm not saying half what I actually feel. Be so good as to tell the Commendatore that I am here!

LAUDISI (dropping his arms dejectedly). As you will, Commissioner!

(He steps over to the door on the left. As he draws the portières and swings the door more widely open, the voices become louder and more confused. As he steps through, there is a sudden silence. The police commissioner stands waiting with a satisfied air, twirling one of the points of his mustache. All of a sudden, there is commotion and cheering in the next room. Cries of delight and applause, mixed with hand-clapping. The police commissioner comes out of his reverie and looks up with an expression of surprise on his features, as though not understanding what it's all about. Through the door to the left come Agazzi, Sirelli, Laudisi, Amalia, Dina, Signora Sirelli, Signora Cini, Signora Nenni, and many other ladies and gentlemen. Agazzi leads the procession. They are all still talking and laughing excitedly, clapping their hands, and crying "I told you so! Fine! Fine! Good! How wonderful! Now we'll know!" etc.).

AGAZZI (stepping forward cordially). Ah, my dear Centuri, I was sure you could! Nothing ever gets by our chief!

COMPANY. Fine! Good! What did you find out? Have you brought something? Is it she? Is it he? Tell us?

COMMISSIONER (who doesn't yet understand what all the excitement is about. For him it has been a mere matter of routine). Why, no... why, Commendatore, simply... you understand....

AGAZZI. Hush! Give him a chance!...

COMMISSIONER. I have done my best. I... but what did Signor Laudisi tell you?

AGAZZI. He told us that you have brought news, real news!

SIRELLI. Specific data, clear, precise!...

LAUDISI (amplifying). ... not many, perhaps, but well authenticated! The best they've managed to trace! Old neighbors of Ponza, you see; people well acquainted with him....

EVERYBODY. Ah! At last! At last! Now we'll know I At last!

(The Commissioner hands the document to Agazzi).

COMMISSIONER. There you have it, Commendatore!

AGAZZI (opening the sheet; as all crowd around him). Let's have a look at it!

COMMISSIONER. But you, Signor Laudisi....

LAUDISI. Don't interrupt, please, the document speaks for itself! Agazzi, you read it.

AGAZZI (to Laudisi). But give me a chance, won't you? Please! Please! Now! There you are!

LAUDISI. Oh, I don't care. I've read the thing already.

EVERYBODY (crowding around him). You've read it already? What did it say? Is it he? Is it she?

LAUDISI (speaking very formally). There is no
doubt whatever, as a former neighbor of Ponza's testifies, that the woman Frola was once in a sanatorium!

THE GROUP (cries of disappointment). Oh really! Too bad! Too bad!

SIGNORA SIRELLI. Signora Frola, did you say?

DINA. Are you sure it was she?

AGAZZI. Why, no! Why, no, it doesn't say anything of the kind! (Coming forward and having the document triumphantly). It doesn't say anything of the kind! (General excitement).

EVERYBODY. Well, what does it say? What does it say?

LAUDISI (insisting). It does too! It says "the Frola woman"—the Frola woman, categorically.

AGAZZI. Nothing of the kind! The witness says that he thinks she was in a sanatorium. He does not assert that she was. Besides, there is another point. He doesn't know whether this Frola woman who was in a sanatorium was the mother or the daughter, the first wife, that is!

EVERYBODY (with relief). Ah!

LAUDISI (insistently). But I say he does. It must be the mother! Who else could it be?

SIRELLI. No, of course, it's the daughter! It's the daughter!

SIGNORA SIRELLI. Just as the old lady said herself!

AMALIA. Exactly! That time when they took her away by force from her husband!...

DINA. Yes, she says that her daughter was taken to a sanatorium on account of a contagious disease.

AGAZZI. Furthermore, observe another thing. The witness does not really belong to their town. He says that he used to go there frequently, but that he does not remember particularly. He remembers that he heard something or other!...

SIRELLI. Ah! How can you depend on such a man's testimony? Nothing but hearsay!

LAUDISI. But, excuse me! If all you people are so sure that Signora Frola is right, what more do you want? Why do you go looking for documents? This is all nonsense!

SIRELLI. If it weren't for the fact that the prefect has accepted Ponza's side of the story, I'll tell you....

COMMISSIONER. Yes, that's true. The prefect said as much to me....

AGAZZI. Yes, but that's because the prefect has never talked with the old lady who lives next door.

SIGNORA SIRELLI. You bet he hasn't. He talked only with Ponza.

SIRELLI. But, for that matter, there are other people of the same mind as the prefect.

A GENTLEMAN. That is my situation, my situation exactly. Yes sir! Because I know of just such a case where a mother went insane over the death of her daughter and insists that the daughter's husband will not allow her to see the girl. The same case to a T.

A SECOND GENTLEMAN. Not exactly to a T! Not exactly to a T! In the case you mention the man didn't marry again. Here, this man Ponza is living with another woman....

LAUDISI (his face brightening with a new idea that has suddenly come to him). I have it, ladies and gentlemen! Did you hear that? It's perfectly simple. Dear me, as simple as Columbus's egg!

EVERYBODY. What? What? What? What?

THE SECOND GENTLEMAN. What did I say? I didn't realize it was important.

LAUDISI. Just a moment, ladies and gentlemen! (Turning to Agazzi): Is the prefect coming here, by chance?

AGAZZI. Yes, we were expecting him. But what's the new idea?

LAUDISI. Why, you were bringing him here to talk with Signora Frola. So far, he is standing by Ponza. When he has talked with the old lady, he'll know whether to believe Ponza or her. That's your idea! Well, I've thought of something better that the prefect can do. Something that he only can do.

EVERYBODY. What is it? What is it? What is it?

LAUDISI (triumphantly). Why, this wife of Ponza's, of course ... at least, the woman he is living with! What this gentleman said suggested the idea to me.

SIRELLI. Get the second woman to talk? Of course! Of course!

DINA. But how can we, when she is kept under lock and key?

LAUDISI. Why, the prefect can use his authority—order her to speak!

AMALIA. Certainly, she is the one who can clear the whole mystery.

SIGNORA SIRELLI. I don't believe it. She'll say just what her husband tells her to say.

LAUDISI. Of course, if she were to speak in his presence of course!

SIRELLI. She must speak with the prefect privately, all by himself.

AGAZZI. And the prefect, as the final authority over the man, will insist that the wife make a formal explicit statement before him. Of course, of course! What do you say, Commissioner?

COMMISSIONER. Why certainly, there's no doubt that if the prefect were so inclined....

AGAZZI. It is the only way out of it, after all. We ought to phone him and explain that he needn't go to the trouble of coming here. You attend to that, will you, Commissioner?

COMMISSIONER. Very glad to! My compliments, ladies! Good afternoon, gentlemen!

SIGNORA SIRELLI. A good idea for once, Laudisi.

DINA. Oh, Nunky, how clever of you! Wise old Nunky!

THE COMPANY. The only way out of it! Yes! Yes! Fine! At last!

AGAZZI. Curious none of us thought of that before!

SIRELLI. Not so curious! None of us ever set eyes on the woman. She might as well be in another world, poor girl.

LAUDISI (as though suddenly impressed by this latter reflection). In another world? Why yes,—are you really sure there is such a woman?

AMALIA. Oh I say! Please, please, Lamberto! SIRELLI (with a laugh). You mean to say you
think there is no such woman?

LAUDISI. How can you be sure there is? You can't guarantee it!

DINA. But the old lady sees her and talks with her every day.

SIGNORA SIRELLI. And Ponza says that, too. They both agree on that point!

LAUDISI. Yes, yes, I don't deny that. But just a moment! If you think of it, isn't Signora Frola right? Well, in that case who is the woman in Ponza's eyes? The phantom of a second wife, of course! Or else Ponza himself is right, and in that case you have the phantom of a daughter in the old lady's eyes! Two phantoms, in other words! Now we've got to find out, ladies and gentlemen, whether this woman, who must be a mere phantom for the one or for the other, is a person, after all for herself. In the situation we are in, I should say there was very good ground for doubting.

AGAZZI. Oh, you make me tired! If we listen to you....

LAUDISI. No, ladies and gentlemen, notice! It may be that she is nothing but a phantom in her own eyes.

SIGNORA NENNI. Why, this is getting to be almost spooky!

SIGNORA CINI. You mean to say it's a ghost, a real ghost? How can you frighten us so?

EVERYBODY. Nonsense! He's only joking! He's only joking!

LAUDISI. Not a bit of it! I'm not joking at all! Who ever saw the woman? No one ever set eyes on her. He talks of her, to be sure; and she, the old woman that is, says that she often sees her.

SIRELLI. Nonsense! Any number of people have seen her; she comes to the balcony of the courtyard.

LAUDISI. Who comes to the balcony?

SIRELLI. A woman in flesh and bones—in skirts, for that matter. People have seen her and people have heard her talk. For heaven's sake, man!

LAUDISI. Are you sure of that?

AGAZZI. And why not, pray? You said so yourself a moment ago!

LAUDISI. Why, yes, I did say so! I did say that the prefect ought to have a talk with whatever woman is there. But notice one thing, it is certain that no ordinary woman is there. No ordinary woman! Of that much we can be sure! And I, for my part, have come to doubt whether she is in any sense of the term, a woman.

SIGNORA SIRELLI. Dear me, dear me! That man simply drives me crazy.

LAUDISI. Well, supposing we wait and see!

EVERYBODY. Well, who is she then? But people have seen her! His wife! On the balcony! She writes letters!

POLICE COMMISSIONER. (in the heat of the confusion comes into the room, excitedly announcing). The prefect is coming! The prefect!

AGAZZI. What do you mean? Coming here? But you went to....

COMMISSIONER. Why yes, but I met him hardly a block away. He was coming here; and Ponza is with him.

SIRELLI. Ah, Ponza!

AGAZZI. Oh, if Ponza is with him, I doubt whether he is coming here. They are probably on their way to the old lady's. Please, Centuri, you just wait on the landing there and ask him if he won't step in here as he promised?

COMMISSIONER. Very well! I'll do so! (He withdraws hurriedly through the door in the rear).

AGAZZI. Won't you people just step into the other room?

SIGNORA SIRELLI. But remember now, be sure to make him see the point! It's the only way out, the only way.

AMALIA (at the door to the left). This way, ladies, if you please!

AGAZZI. Won't you just stay here, Sirelli; and you, too, Lamberto? (All the others go out through the door to the left).

AGAZZI (to Laudisi). But let me do the talking, won't you!

LAUDISI. Oh, as for that, don't worry. In fact, if you prefer, I'll go into the other room....

AGAZZI. No, no, it's better for you to be here. Ah, here he is now!

THE PREFECT is a man of about sixty, tall, thick set, good natured, affable.

PREFECT. Ah, Agazzi, glad to see you. How goes it, Sirelli? Good to see you again, Laudisi. (He shakes hands all around).

AGAZZI (motioning toward a chair). I hope you won't mind my having asked you to come here.

PREFECT. No, I was coming, just as I promised you!

AGAZZI (noticing the police commissioner at the door). Oh, I'm sorry, Commissioner! Please come in! Here, have a chair!

PREFECT (good-naturedly to Sirelli). By the way, Sirelli, they tell me that you've gone half nutty over this blessed affair of our new secretary.

SIRELLI. Oh, no, governor, believe me. I'm not the only one! The whole village is worked up.

AGAZZI. And that's putting it very mildly.

PREFECT. What's it all about? What's it all about?

AGAZZI. Of course, governor, you're probably not posted on the whole business. The old lady lives here next door....

PREFECT. Yes, I understand so.

SIRELLI. No, one moment, please, governor. You haven't talked with the poor old lady yet.

PREFECT. I was on my way to see her. (Turning to Agazzi). I had promised you to see her here, but Ponza came and begged me, almost on my knees, to see her in her own house. His idea was to put an end to all this talk that's going around. Do you think he would have done such a thing if he weren't absolutely sure?

AGAZZI. Of course, he's sure! Because when she's talking in front of him, the poor woman....

SIRELLI (suddenly getting in his oar). She says just what he wants her to say, governor; which proves that she is far from being as insane as he claims.

AGAZZI. We had a sample of that, here, yesterday,
PREFECT. Why, I understand so. You see he's trying all the time to make her believe he's crazy. He warned me of that. And how else could he keep the poor woman in her illusion? Do you see any way? All this talk of yours is simply torture to the poor fellow! Believe me, pure torture!

SIRELLI. Very well, governor! But supposing she is the one who is trying to keep him in the idea that her daughter is dead; so as to reassure him that his wife will not be taken from him again. In that case, you see, governor, it's the old lady who is being tortured, and not Ponza!

AGAZZI. The moment you see the possibility of that, governor.... Well, you ought to hear her talk; but all by herself, when he's not around. Then you'd see the possibility all right....

SIRELLI. Just as we all see it! I leave it to you, governor. I was the one who first suggested bringing the woman here.

PREFECT. And do you think, Laudisi, I ought to see the old lady next door?

LAUDISI. No, I advise no such thing, governor. In my judgment you are doing very well in depending on what Ponza tells you.

PREFECT. Ah, I see! Because you, too, think that Ponza....

AGAZZI. No, not at all.... because I'm also satisfied to have all these people stand on what Signora Frola says, if that does them any good.

AGAZZI. So you see, eh, governor? That's what you call arguing, eh?

PREFECT. Just a moment! Let me understand! (Turning to Laudisi): So you say we can also trust what the old lady says?

PREFECT. Of course you can! Implicitly! And so you can depend upon what Ponza says.

Implicitly!

PREFECT. Excuse me, I don't follow you!

AGAZZI. Since we haven't been able to get any positive proof, there is only one thing left. You, as Ponza's final superior, as the man who can fire him if need be, can obtain a statement from his wife.

PREFECT. Make his wife talk, you mean?

SIRELLI. But not in the presence of her husband, you understand.

AGAZZI. Yes, making sure she tells the truth!

SIRELLI. ... tell whether she's the daughter of Signora Frola, that is, as we think she must be....

AGAZZI. ... or a second wife who is consenting to impersonate the daughter of Signora Frola, as Ponza claims.

PREFECT. ... and as I believe myself, without a shadow of doubt! (Thinking a moment) Why, I don't see any objection to having her talk. Who could object? Ponza? But Ponza, as I know very well, is more eager than anybody else to have this talk quieted down. He's all upset over this whole business, and said he was willing to do anything I proposed. I'm sure he will raise no objection. So if it will ease the minds of you people here.... Say, Centuri (the police commissioner rises), won't you just ask Ponza to step in here a moment? He's next door with his mother-in-law.

COMMISSIONER. At once, Your Excellency! (He bows and withdraws through the door at the rear).

AGAZZI. Oh well, if he consents....

PREFECT. He'll consent, all right. And we'll be through with it in a jiffy. We'll bring her right in here so that you people....

AGAZZI. Here, in my house?

SIRELLI. You think he'll let his wife come in here?

PREFECT. Just leave it to me, just leave it to me! I prefer to have her right here because, otherwise you see, you people would always suppose that I and Ponza had....

AGAZZI. Oh, please, governor, no! That's not fair!

SIRELLI. Oh, no, governor, we trust you implicitly!

PREFECT. Oh, I'm not offended, not at all! But you know very well that I'm on his side in this matter; and you'd always be thinking that to hush up any possible scandal in connection with a man in my office.... No, you see. I must insist on having the interview here.... Where's your wife, Agazzi?

AGAZZI. In the other room, governor, with some other ladies.

PREFECT. Other ladies? Aha, I see! (Laughing).

You have a regular detective bureau here, eh? (The police commissioner enters with Ponza).

COMMISSIONER. May I come in? Signor Ponza is here.
PREFECT. Thanks, Centuri. This way, Ponza, come right in! (Ponza bows).

AGAZZI. Have a chair, Ponza. (Ponza bows and sits down).

PREFECT. I believe you know these gentlemen? (Ponza rises and bows).

AGAZZI. Yes, I introduced them yesterday. And this is Laudisi, my wife's brother. (Ponza bows). PREFECT. I venture to disturb you, my dear Ponza, just to tell you that here with these friends of mine... (At the first words of the prefect, Ponza evinces the greatest nervousness and agitation).

PREFECT. Was there something you wanted to say, Ponza?

PONZA. Yes, there is something I want to say, governor.

PREFECT. Was there something you wanted to say?

PONZA. Yes, governor, and I appreciate your kindness, really!

PREFECT. And then you say that you're as fond of this poor old lady as you would be if she were your own mother. Well, now, just remember that these good people here seem to be prying into your affairs because they, too, are fond of her!...

PONZA. But they're killing her, I tell you, governor! They're killing her, and I warned them in advance.

PREFECT. Very well, Ponza, very well! Now we'll get through with this matter in no time. See here, it is all very simple. There is one way that you can convince these people without the least doubt in the world. Oh, not me—I don't need convincing. I believe you.

PONZA. But they won't believe me, no matter what I say.

AGAZZI. That's not so! When you came here after your mother-in-law's first visit and told us that she was insane, all of us... well, we were surprised, but we believed you. (Turning to the prefect). But after he left, you understand, the old lady came back....

PREFECT. Yes, yes, I know. He told me. (Turning to Ponza again). She came back here and said that she was trying to do with you exactly what you say you were trying to do with her. It's natural, isn't it, that people hearing both stories, should be somewhat confused. Now you see that these good people, in view of what your mother-in-law says, can't possibly be sure of what you say. So there you are. Now, such being the case, you and your mother-in-law—why, it's perfectly simple—you two just step aside. Now you know you're telling the truth, don't you? So do I! So you can't possibly object to their hearing the testimony of the only person who does know, aside from you two.

PONZA. And who may that be, pray?

PREFECT. Why, your wife!

PONZA. My wife! (Decisively and angrily). Ah, no! I refuse! Never in the world! Never! PREFECT. And why not, old man?

PONZA. Bring my wife here to satisfy the curiosity of these strangers?

PREFECT (sharply). And my curiosity, too, if you don't mind! What objection can you have?

PONZA. Oh, but governor, no! My wife! Here? No! Why drag my wife in? These people ought to believe me!

PREFECT. But don't you see, my dear fellow, that the course you're taking now is just calculated to discredit what you say?

AGAZZI. His mistake in the first place, governor, was trying to prevent his mother-in-law from coming here and calling—a double discourtesy, mark you, to my wife and to my daughter! PONZA. But what in the name of God do you people want of me? You've been nagging and nagging at that poor old woman next door; and now you want to get your clutches on my wife! No, governor! I refuse to submit to such an indignity! She owes nothing to anybody. My wife is not making visits in this town. You say you believe me, governor? That's enough for me! Here's my resignation! I'll go out and look for another job!

PREFECT. No, no, Ponza, I must speak plainly. In the first place I have always treated you on the square; and you have no right to speak in that tone of voice to me. In the second place you are beginning to make me doubt your word by refusing to furnish me—not other people—but me, the evidence that I have asked for in your interest, evidence, moreover, that so far as I can see, cannot possibly do you any harm. It seems to me that my colleague here, Signor Agazzi, can ask a lady to come to his house! But no, if you prefer, we'll go and see her.

PONZA. So you really insist, governor?

PREFECT. I insist, but as I told you, in your own interest. You realize, besides, that I might have the legal right to question her....

PONZA. I see, I see! So that's it! An official
investigation! Well, why not, after all? I will bring my wife here, just to end the whole matter. But how can you guarantee me that this poor old lady next door will not catch sight of her?
PREFECT. Why, I hadn't thought of that! She does live right next door.

AGAZZI (speaking up). We are perfectly willing to go to Signor Ponza's house.
PONZA. No, no! I was just thinking of you people. I don't want you to play any more tricks on me. Any mistakes might have the most frightful consequences, set her going again!
AGAZZI. You're not very fair to us, Ponza, it seems to me.
PREFECT. Or you might bring your wife to my office, rather....
PONZA. No, no! Since you're going to question her anyway, we might as well get through with it. We'll bring her here, right here. I'll keep an eye on my mother-in-law myself. We'll have her here right away, governor, and get an end of this nonsense once and for all, once and for all! (He hurries away through the rear exit.)
PREFECT. I confess I was not expecting so much opposition on his part.

AGAZZI. Ah, you'll see. He'll go and cook up with his wife just what she's to say!
PREFECT. Oh, don't worry as to that! I'll question the woman myself.

SIRELLI. But he's more excited than he's ever been before.
PREFECT. Well, I confess I never saw him just in this state of mind. Perhaps it is the sense of outrage he feels in having to bring his wife....

SIRELLI, In having to let her loose for once, you ought to say!
PREFECT. A man isn't necessarily crazy because he wants to keep an eye on his wife.

AGAZZI. Of course he says it's to protect her from the mother-in-law.
PREFECT. I wasn't thinking of just that—he may be jealous of the woman!

SIRELLI. Jealous to the extent of refusing her a servant? For you know, don't you, he makes his wife do all the housework?

AGAZZI. And he does all the marketing himself every morning.

COMMISSIONER. That's right, governor! I've had him shadowed. An errand boy from the market carries the stuff as far as the door.

SIRELLI. But he never lets the boy inside.
PREFECT. Dear me, dear me! He excused himself for that servant business when I took the matter up with him.

LAUDISI. And that's information right from the source!
PREFECT. He says he does it to save money.

LAUDISI. He has to keep two establishments on one salary.

SIRELLI. Oh, we weren't criticising how he runs his house; but I ask you as a matter of common sense: he is a man of some position, and do you think that this second wife of his, as he calls her, who ought to be a lady, would consent to do all the work about the house?....

AGAZZI. The hardest and most disagreeable work, you understand....

SIRELLI. ... just out of consideration for the mother of her husband's first wife?
AGAZZI. Oh, I say, governor, be honest now! That doesn't seem probable, does it?
PREFECT. I confess it does seem queer....

LAUDISI. ... in case this second woman is an ordinary woman!
PREFECT. Yes, but let's be frank. It doesn't seem reasonable. But yet, one might say—well, you could explain it as generosity on her part, and even better, as jealousy on his part. Lunatic or no lunatic, there is no denying that he's jealous! (A confused clamor of voices is heard from the next door).

AGAZZI. My, I wonder what's going on in there! (Amalia enters from the door on the left in a state of great excitement).

AMALIA. Signora Frola is here!

AGAZZI. Impossible! How in the world did she get in? Who sent for her?

AMALIA. Nobody! She came of her own accord!

PREFECT. Oh, no, please—just a moment! No!

Send her away, madam, please!

AGAZZI. We've got to get rid of her. Don't let her in here! We must absolutely keep her out! (Signora Frola appears at the door on the left, trembling, beseeching, weeping, a handkerchief in her hand. The people in the next room are crowding around behind her).

SIGNORA FROLA. Oh, please, please! You tell them, Signor Agazzi! Don't let them send me away!

AGAZZI. But you must go away, madam! We simply can't allow you to be here now!


AMALIA. But don't you see? The prefect is there! They're having an important meeting.

SIGNORA FROLA. Oh, the prefect! Please, governor, please! I was intending to go and see you.

PREFECT. No, I am so sorry, madam. I can't see you just now! You must go away!

SIGNORA FROLA. Yes, I am going away. I am going to leave town this very day! I am going to leave town and never come back again!

AGAZZI. Oh, we didn't mean that, my dear Signora Frola. We meant that we couldn't see you here, just now, in this room. Do me a favor, please! You can see the governor by and by.

SIGNORA FROLA. But why? I don't understand! What's happened!

AGAZZI. Why, your son-in-law will soon be here! There, now do you see?

SIGNORA FROLA. Oh, he's coming here? Oh, yes, in that case.... Yes, yes, ... I'll go! But there was something I wanted to say to you people. You must stop all this. You must let us alone. You think you are helping me. You are trying to do me a favor; but really, what you're doing is working me a great wrong. I've got to leave town this very day because he must not be aroused. What do you want of him anyway? What are you trying to do to him? Why are you having him
SIGNORA FROLA. Yes, governor, that's it! If he
PREFECT. You're right, you're quite right, Signora
SIGNORA FROLA. Oh, my dear Signora Agazzi, you are trying to rob me of the one comfort I had in life, the chance of seeing my daughter once in a while, at least from a distance! (She begins to weep.)
PREFECT. What in the world are you thinking of? (At this moment a wave of surprise, anxiety, dismay, sweeps over the company. Everybody falls silent and turns to the door. Suppressed exclamations are audible.)
SIGNORA FROLA. Oh, Lena! Lena! Lena! Lena! (She dashes forward and throws her arms about the veiled woman with the passionate hysteria of a mother who has not embraced her daughter for years and years. But at the same time from beyond the door in the rear another piercing cry comes. Ponza dashes into the room.)
PONZA. No! Julia! Julia! Julia! (At his voice Signora Ponza draws up stiffly in the arms of Signora Frola who is clasping her tightly. Ponza notices that his mother-in-law is thus desperately entwined about his wife and he shrieks desperately.)
PONZA. Cowards! Liars! I knew you would! I knew you would! It is just like the lot of you! (Without removing her veil, she proudly casts a sweeping glance around at the company, and withdraws. They all stand looking after her. Profound silence on the stage.)
SIGNORA PONZA. Not at all, not at all, sir! No, for myself I am—whomever you choose to have me, (Their arms about each other's waists, and holding each other up affectionately. Ponza and his mother-in-law withdraw through the rear door. They are both weeping. Profound silence in the company. All those present stand there with their eyes fixed upon the departing couple. As Signora Frola and Ponza are lost from view, all eyes turn expectantly upon the veiled lady. Some of the women are weeping.)
SIGNORA PONZA. What? The truth? The truth is simply this. I am the daughter of Signora Frola, and I am the second wife of Signor Ponza. Yes, and—for myself, I am nobody, I am nobody...