

Ettore Fieramosca and the challenge of Barletta

All the drawings are by Gilberto Pace.

**Massimo D'Azeglio**

**ETTORE FIERAMOSCA  
AND THE CHALLENGE  
OF BARLETTA**

*Intermediate English*

*Adaptation in English: Luca Nava*  
*Language consultant: Regina Goretti Meehan*

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## Massimo D'Azeglio

Massimo d'Azeglio was statesman, novelist and painter. He was from a noble class background, born in Turin on October 24, 1798. At the age of sixteen whilst spending a period in Rome with his father he developed a love for art from which he decided to become a painter. In Rome, he led an abstemious life, maintaining himself by painting with historical subjects Romantic landscapes. He constantly meditated on the political state of Italy. In 1830, he returned to Turin, and, after his father's death in 1831, moved to Milan. There he remained for twelve years, moving in the literary and artistic circles of the city. He became good friend with Alessandro Manzoni, whose daughter he eventually married.

Literature became his chief occupation and he produced two historical novels, *Ettore Fieramosca* (1833) and *Niccolò de' Lapi* (1841), an imitation of Walter Scott, with pronounced political tendencies: his object being to point out the evils of foreign domination in Italy and to reawaken national feeling. Like Vincenzo Gioberti he believed in an Italian confederation under papal auspices, and was opposed to the radical wing of the Liberal party. His political activity increased, and he wrote many pamphlets, among which was *I lutti di Lombardia* (1848).

On the outbreak of the first war of independence, D'Azeglio attired with the papal uniform took part in the defense of Vicenza, where he was severely wounded. After the defeat of Novara (March 23, 1849), Victor Emmanuel II, King of Sardinia, called D'Azeglio on to form a cabinet. He concluded a treaty of peace, dissolved the Chamber, and summoned a new one to ratify it. The treaty was accepted, and D'Azeglio continued in office for the next three years. He conducted Piedmont affairs with tact and ability, improving its diplomatic relations, and opposing the claims of the Roman Curia. He invited Count Cavour, then a rising young politician, to enter the ministry in 1850.

In October 1852, owing to ill-health and dissatisfaction with some of his colleagues, he resigned and retired into private life, appointing Cavour to the king as his successor.

For the next four years, he lived modestly at Turin, devoting himself once more to art, although he also continued to take an active interest in politics. In 1855, he was appointed director of the Turin art gallery. In 1859, he was given various political missions. In 1860, Cavour appointed him governor of Milan, evacuated by the Austrians after the battle of Magenta, a position that he held with great ability. But, disapproving of the government's policy with regard to Garibaldi's Sicilian campaign and the occupation by Piedmont of the Kingdom of Naples as inopportune, he resigned from office.

Assisted by his two daughters, he dedicated his last years passed on the Lake Maggiore to his autobiography *I miei ricordi* (posthumous 1867), important witness of the Risorgimento.

He died of fever in Turin on January 15, 1866.

## I

At the close of a beautiful April day in the year 1503, the bell of St Domenico in Barletta rang the last tolls of the *avemaria*. In the square near the sea were Spanish and Italian soldiers, some of them were walking, others were seated on the boats hauled ashore. As it was custom of the soldiery – of every age and nation – their demeanour<sup>1</sup> seemed to say: we are the masters of the world. They were men of Consalvo Fernandez from Cordova, a brave leader, called “the great captain of Spain.” They wore no uniform and everyone, both infantryman and cavalryman, got dressed and took up arms as he liked, so that from the mob a remarkable range of costume came up. The Spaniards were mostly serious, motionless, like shrewd bravos, wrapped in their national *capa*; the Italians were talkative and ready to use the Pistoiese dagger (a double-edged weapon made in Pistoia). At that time, Consalvo had been waiting for the Spanish reinforcements before attacking the French army, which was in greater numbers.

At sunset as the soldiers began to withdraw into their quarters and lodgings, a vessel slowly approached the seashore. A little boat with two men aboard was set afloat in the direction of the shore. Afterwards the vessel in full sail went off and vanished. Gone on shore, the two men made for the inn of Baccio from Rieti, nicknamed “Venom” because he was a suspicious fellow. Here were the soldiers of Prospero Colonna com-

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<sup>1</sup> Demeanour: behaviour.

pany, who was in Consalvo's pay lodged. Not one of them cared about the newcomers arrival except Boscherino, who excitingly exclaimed: 'Oh, the duke!'



Boscherino had been squad leader to valiant captains of venture, who had fought for the Italian lordships, and he had always stood out<sup>2</sup> because of his valour. Now he was in the company of Prospero Colonna's pay.

One of the two newly arrived strangers, Sir Michael, asked the host for supper. After having eaten, he demanded two rooms for the night. Boscherino still sat in

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<sup>2</sup> To stand out: to be noticeable.



the tavern when suddenly he felt a tug<sup>3</sup> at his cloak, and turning he recognized Sir Michael. Though the soldier was steady and self-confident, he felt a sense of weakness in oblivion as to what was to come. He would have rather brave ten rival swords than face the duke. The two went upstairs into the room reserved for the duke. Being alone in the presence of that fearless man stroke terror into Boscherino. The room was crowded with small pieces of furniture, whatnots, cupboards, and little table. The quilt<sup>4</sup> of a high, white feather-bed was just visible behind a screen. The duke sat on the edge of the bed. Tall, lean, with a dagger in his belt, the sword on the table, a hat with a single black feather, he looked like a man who did not know what rest of mind and body was. His look was now more striking than a viper, now as sweet as a child's eye, now as terrifying as the bloody pupil<sup>5</sup> of a hyena was. He faced up to Boscherino, who looked visibly anxious, as if he was awaiting his death sentence.

'Do you recognize me?' the duke asked, 'Do not disclose my presence. You are a brave soldier and serve well of which you can be rewarded.'

'Your illustrious Excellency can count on me' responded Boscherino, earnestly attentive and obsequious. These words were enough for the duke to dismiss Boscherino, who was then relieved from that dreadful presence.

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<sup>3</sup> Tug: sudden hard pull.

<sup>4</sup> Quilt: cover for bed.

<sup>5</sup> Pupil: (here) small round black area at the centre of the eye.

## II

Diego Garcia de Paredes brigade, under the command of Consalvo's orders, arrived home at two in the morning, where they found lodging in the Venom's Inn. They brought some livestock and three French barons as prisoners, Jacques de Guignes, Giraut de Forses and La Mothe, who would have yielded golden ducats from their release. A slanting shaft of candles lighted the tavern. Venom put food on the table and Paredes, as he unfolded his table napkin, looking at his brigade's hearty appetite, stood saying: '*Duelos con pan son menos*'. He sat at the head of the table and made the three prisoners sit by his sides; therefore they could partake of the ample dinner along with the whole brigade. In the dim glow of the candles their rough, sun-tanned faces, turned red from the tiredness and their present situation, produced an effect of light and shade, worthy of the works of the Flemish painter Gherard van Honthorst<sup>7</sup>, (famous for his paintings of light effects in darkness).

While eating with great relish<sup>8</sup>, conversation got under way. They spoke of battle, adventures and leaders. La Mothe broke into discussion and praised the value and loyalty of French soldiers. For five years, he had ridden through Italy, fighting for the King of France Charles VIII, in the company of famous knights like Louis d'Ars. Soon the man himself became very unre-

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<sup>6</sup> 'When bread is on the table, troubles are more bearable.'

<sup>7</sup> Utrecht, November 4, 1592 – Utrecht, April 27, 1656.

<sup>8</sup> Relish: pleasure.

strained and had bitter words for Italian soldiers, considered little reliable and betrayers, like Lodovico Sforza called the Moor, who had poisoned his nephew Giangaleazzo Maria Sforza, Duke of Milan, and like Cesare Borgia, who had killed his brother, his brother-in-law and poisoned cardinals opposing his policy.

The Spanish soldier Inigo, friend of many Italian militants under the flag of Spain, did not welcome that Italian soldiers, betrayed and beaten by the invasion of Charles VIII in Italy, could be reviled and considered betrayers by La Mothe. But this last one, turning to his French companions, continued his remarks, giving vent to his feelings and referring a known and pitiable fact: 'And what about Ginevra from Monreale? The most beautiful, virtuous, lovable woman I have ever met! These friends of mine saw her during our marching through Rome in 1492. Her ill luck made her known to Cesare Borgia, then cardinal. She had got married to a French officer, more for obedience to her father's wishes than for other reasons. A dark disease caught her, and all possible remedies were in vain: she must have died. Casually I discovered that her disease was nothing else than poison given to her by Cesare Borgia, then Duke of Valentinois, for that called Valentine.'

The man paused for a moment, then went on: 'Coming to Barletta today I noticed among your soldiers a man I had seen in Rome: young, tall, stout, brown hair, a little sombre<sup>9</sup>. It is widely rumoured that he was the secret lover of Ginevra and that, after her death, he had

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<sup>9</sup> Sombre: sad and serious.

disappeared. *Mais oui, je suis sûr que c'est le même*<sup>10</sup>.' He said turning to his French comrades.

'Is he Italian?', someone asked.

'Yes, he is.'

'And what about his wear?', someone else questioned him quick and eager.

'He wore plain armour, a chain mail with a light blue leather and sash.'

'Ettore Fieramosca,' Inigo exclaimed, after having pondered a while.

Inigo praised Fieramosca's good nature, value, and courtesy. The soldier Azevedo explained the sadness of Fieramosca because of his lost love. The Spaniards witnessed the value of Italian soldiers. But the three prisoners, heated by the wine and the words, said without mincing their words with an austere gibe<sup>11</sup>: 'For many years we have made war in Italy, and we have handled more daggers and poisons than lances and swords. A French gendarme would be ashamed to have for stable hands<sup>12</sup> these Italian lazybones.'

Inigo listened to them with rapt attention, but could not stand anymore such a blatant exhibition of hostile feeling and, in the name of the Italians, he mounted a challenge to the defamers of Italian soldiers.

'We are prisoners,' assented La Mothe, 'and we can't accept challenges, unless the authorities who detain us will allow it. All the same, in the name of the French, I reassert that Italian soldiers are unable to fight, more able to betray than to wage war. If someone says that I lie, I'll challenge him!'

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<sup>10</sup> 'Yes, I am sure that it is he.'

<sup>11</sup> Gibe: insulting remark.

<sup>12</sup> Stable hand: person who works in a stable.