

## Little Ancient World



**Antonio Fogazzaro**

**LITTLE ANCIENT WORLD**

*Intermediate English*

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## Antonio Fogazzaro

Fogazzaro was born in Vicenza to a rich family. Among his teachers was the fellow citizen Giacomo Zanella. In 1864 he got a law degree in Turin. After his marriage (1866) he moved to Milan. In 1869 he was back in Vicenza to work as lawyer, but he left this profession very early to write books permanently.

He began with a short poem *Miranda* (1874) and then a collection of poems *Valsolda* (1876), but he had a greater passion for writing novels: *Malombra* (1881), *Daniele Cortis* (1885), *The Mystery of a Poet* (1888).

For some aspects his narrative is connected with verism, and further interested in working out certain spiritual problems. Topics of his main works are the aristocratic setting, the conflict between sense of duty and passions, the attempt to conciliate faith and science. In some cases this brings the tormented soul of characters into mystic experiences.

His masterpiece is *Little Ancient World*. The novel is set in his beloved Valsolda on the Lake Lugano, in the 1850s. It has delightful evocations of the landscape, and strong characterizations which reveal the inner psychological conflicts of the characters. It is an impassioned story of lovers struggling to break the barriers of aristocratic prejudice that oppose their marriage. It is also a story of patriotism - of the freeing of

Italy from the Austrian yoke.

The story is continued with *Little Modern World* (1900) and *The Saint* (1905).

The second book of this trilogy tells the dramatic story of the son of the hero of *Little Ancient World*, and of his love for the beautiful Jeanne Dessalle, - a story that presents a vivid picture of the Italian world of rank and fashion, and involves, too, a study of political and ecclesiastical life. *The Saint* is full of religious zeal that finds a double outlet - in asceticism and works of mercy and in an attempt to reform the Church of Rome from within.

Fogazzaro was a deeply religious man but supported reform in the Catholic Church and toured Italy proposing to reconcile Darwin's theory of evolution with Christianity. He found new interpretations in positivist and evolutionist theories, and because of this the Church of Rome banned the novels *The Saint* and *Leila* (1911) for modernism.

After that he made an act of submission to the Catholic Church. He died in his birthplace, in Vicenza, in 1911.

## First Part

### 1 - Risotto and Truffles

It was blowing a cold breeze as Mr Pasotti, a retired customs official, his wife Barbara and the curé of Puria walked down from Albogasio Superiore, in Valsolda, to Casarico to take the rowing-boat. Fortunately it was not the frosty breeze of 1848: now, three years later, it was milder, accompanied by a misty rain, that went on during their coastal navigation along the lake of Lugano from Casarico to Cressogno, where the Marquise Orsola Maironi had a lunch party in her villa. Trout, risotto, white truffles, grouse and wine from Ghemme were ready to be served there.

‘Dear lady, dear official, curé’, the old Marquise saluted them with her big nasal voice. She was as cold with her guests as she was with her dog Friend.

Among the invited were Eugenia Carabelli, her daughter Carolina, the Marquis Bianchi from Oria, his daughter, the prefect of the sanctuary of Caravina, then Paolo Sala called ‘Paolin’ and Paolo Pozzi called ‘Paolon’.

During the reception Franco Maironi came into the dining room greeting the visitors. He was the only heir, son of a son of the Marquise, Alessandro, died at twenty-eight. Since he had lost his mother after his birth, his grandmother had looked after him. He was

tall and slender, and had a tangle of rather long, dark hair, and this had procured for him the nickname of “the cloud sweeper”. He had eloquent, light blue eyes, a keen, animated and pleasing face, quick to blush or turn pale. He inherited a scant<sup>1</sup> dowry from his mother, compared to his grandmother who was enthroned in all her calm dignity upon several millions of Austrian lire.

The Marquise Orsola Maironi had organized this party to combine an encounter between his grandson and Carolina Carabelli. According to her, she was a good partner for Franco, for her noble rank and good family. Mrs Eugenia Carabelli from Loveno was in fact an old acquaintance of the Maironis.

But Franco disagreed thoroughly with her. Two years before that, he had ventured to ask her consent to marry a young girl from Valsolda, from a good family, but neither rich nor of noble birth. His grandmother’s resolute refusal had stopped him and the relationship was broken between her and the girl’s family. The Marquise always had suspicion of Franco and that ‘madam trap’ (how she called her), Miss Luisa Rigey. She lived at Castello, in Valsolda, with her mother Teresa, who suffered from a heart disease (hypertrophy), which made everyone worry including Franco.

Ladies and gentlemen sat around the table and were enjoying the delicious lunch. After several minutes of light-hearted banter<sup>2</sup> Pasotti brought the main conversation round to politics. The guest Viscontin started to tell that the receiver of customs had

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<sup>1</sup> Scant: barely sufficient.

<sup>2</sup> Banter: friendly remarks and jokes.

confiscated a roll of music manuscript he had with him, taking the crotchets and quavers<sup>3</sup> for a secret political correspondence.

‘The receiver of customs is an excellent official’ said Pasotti in an explanatory way. The Marquise, a convinced Austria sympathizer, confirmed that he was a conscientious man. But for Franco the man was a ‘beast’. That afternoon Franco had trouble to bear Pasotti for his manners and his political reasoning. In his anger he broke a dish in two pieces in front of Pasotti, and then left the party. The ladies were somewhat stunned<sup>4</sup> by his behaviour, but nevertheless the lunch party went on.

## 2 - On the Threshold of a New Life

‘Scoundrel, silly ass of an Austrian!’ brooded Franco over Pasotti with growing unease, going upstairs into his room. There he found peace again. It was 4.30 p.m., just a few hours to the solemn event, a new life for him. Very few people knew that at eleven he would join in marriage to Luisa Rigey. All had been arranged with the aid of the curé of Castello and Mrs Rigey’s brother, the civil engineer Piero Ribera from Oria, employed in the Imperial and Royal Office of Public Works at Como. It was a secret wedding: Franco would remain with his grandmother, Luisa with her mother, until it was the right moment to acknowledge

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<sup>3</sup> Crotchets and quavers: musical signatures.

<sup>4</sup> Stunned: shocked.

their union to the Marquise. If his grandmother hardened her heart against them, the young couple and Mrs Rigey would take up their abode<sup>5</sup> in a house in Oria, belonging to the engineer Ribera, a bachelor<sup>6</sup> who was supporting his sister's family, and would now accept Franco in place of a son.

Franco had been studying law in the hope to find a good job for his future. He was also fond of poetry, painting and music. His favourite writers were Foscolo and Giusti, he loved to write lyrics for Luisa and to play piano.

That afternoon he made up his mind to write a letter to his friend, the old bishop of Lodi, Mgr Benaglia, the only person who, in the future, might have been able to influence his grandmother in his favour. He felt it was his duty to inform him of the reasons for the wedding, hoping for his help at the moment of confessing the fact to the Marquise.

He begged the old bishop's prayers for his Luisa and for himself, and expressed a faith in God so perfect and so pure, that the most unbelieving heart must have been touched by it. Franco was as impetuous, hot-blooded in his temper as plain in his faith. He had never doubted his religion, avoiding any extreme form of mysticism and asceticism. He followed his ardent generous heart, his passionate inclinations, his loyal nature scorning<sup>7</sup> every cowardice and falsehood.

Franco was invited downstairs for the evening rosary. The Marquise herself usually recited the prayers, enthroned on her sofa. After the prayers the old lady exchanged a few words with Franco: 'I'm pleased that

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<sup>5</sup> Abode: home.

<sup>6</sup> Bachelor: unmarried man.

<sup>7</sup> To scorn: to despise, to disregard.

Miss Carabelli met you, I hope you don't hold your old views yet.'

On hearing that, Franco faced her with the greatest composure: 'What would happen if I held still my old views?' The Marquise replied decisively: 'If it happens what I don't want, I won't leave you a farthing<sup>8</sup> of money at my death. That is the score you would have to settle with me, then there would be a score to settle with God.' It was the manifestation of a will which could not be gainsaid<sup>9</sup>.

'How is that?' Franco questioned, 'God shall come first with me, and you afterwards!'

Unwilling to let the subject drop, she went on: 'Duty of a good Christian is to obey father and mother and I represent them for you.'

'But God comes first!' he repeated sternly. The Marquise rang the bell and closed the conversation thus: 'Now we understand each other perfectly.'

'Better never to bring Luisa to this accursed house, better never to oblige her to bear this rule, this arrogance, this voice, this face! Better to live on bread and water, and look to hard work for the rest, rather than to accept anything from her. Better become a gardener, a boatman, or a charcoal burner!' said Franco to himself.

Then more determined than ever to carry his plan through to the finish, he put on a dark suit and told the old footman<sup>10</sup> he would be out all the night.

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<sup>8</sup> Farthing: nickel, small coin.

<sup>9</sup> To gainsay: to contradict, to oppose.

<sup>10</sup> Footman: servant.

### 3 - The Great Step

Engineer Ribera had promised to testify to Luisa's secret wedding but now, being about to go to the tryst at Castello, he feared to compromise his political reputation, because he was the first political deputy of Porlezza, as the highest communal authority was then called. Nevertheless, accompanied by Giacomo Puttini, he arrived at the village of Castello at Luisa's house.

Since 1844 at the age of fifteen Luisa had been fatherless; uncle Piero Ribera had become more than a father to her, he was the Providence of the house. Enjoying a good salary, he had lived frugally in Como with an old housekeeper and his savings were passed on to the Rigey's household. At the very beginning he had disapproved of their nuptials, because socially they were too unequal, but then considering their determination and his sister Teresa's consent, he started to help the secret betrothed<sup>11</sup>, keeping his opinion to himself.

'How is mummy?' Ribera asked Luisa.

'She was quite well until half an hour ago when Franco told her of his argument with grandma. He has dared to defy<sup>12</sup> the Marquise; this is not particularly pleasing news to her. Now she is a bit upset.'

Meanwhile Franco was in the sitting-room with the curé, he hurried to greet Luisa's uncle in a manner which expressed a long-standing affection.

It was already time to go to church. Before taking

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<sup>11</sup> Betrothed: engaged couple.

<sup>12</sup> To defy: to challenge.