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What is Sufficient to Speak an Italian.

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What is Sufficient to Speak an Italian

Thomas Mann's U.S. Army son recounts the unfathomable adventures of brave little Polyglot
by S/Sgt. Klaus Mann

Being stationed in Italy, and eager to improve my rather inadequate knowledge of the Italian language, I was naturally delighted to discover a little book with the promising title, *What is sufficient to speak an Italian: The Small and Modern Polyglot* (Rossi, Book-seller, S. Anna of Lombards Street, 50, Naples).

It's not so much as a source of linguistic instruction that I treasure my *Polyglot*. The Italian syntax is probably quite all right; but the beauty of the work is in the English translations corresponding with the Italian text. What the author presents, with exquisite modesty, as a "Selection of Phrases," is really an epic story, the great saga of brave little Polyglot. It opens with a suggestive fragment called "The Inquiries."

"Do you know mister?—No, I do not know. Yes, sir, I know very well mister's name. He is one of my friends.—Can you tell me where he dwells?—He dwells in street. . . . But in this moment he is not in the town; he is in the country with his father.—Can you tell me his dwelling with more precision?—If you please, I can accompany you.—I accept your offer."

Instead of continuing his quest for mister's dwelling, Polyglot drops by at the post office, where he introduces himself by asking this peculiar question: "And how much does letter for England cost?" The answer is, logically: "If you please, you can profit by a postcard. Here are some postage-stamps." And, as an afterthought: "Oh! excuse me, I was giving you one that is annulled."

The telegraph office is nearby—"at the second floor, on your right hand." There, a crisp conversation develops between Polyglot and an employee of the telegraph company:

"Show me your passport.—Here is my passport.—And here is your telegram.—When did it arrive?—Only one hour ago.—When do you shut the office?—At midnight."

So far so good. The next episode is enig-

matically called, "Before to share"—which is the English version of *Prima di partire*: the Italian verb *partire* having the double meaning of "to share, to divide," and "to depart, to retire."

Travelers have one hell of a time, these days: "You must provide yourself of a passport.—You must go to the consul to have the authentication.—Tell you to the servant to bring here my trunk.—Cannot we hire out a trunk and a travelling bag?—All these effects cannot enter into the trunk. . . ."

Finally Polyglot—with traveling bag, effects, and all—manages to get out of his chaotic home. A new phase of his adventure begins: namely, "Questions and inquiries on the sway." Polyglot makes a public nuisance of himself by pestering everybody: "Where this street leads?—Am I going right to . . . ?—I see that I have taken the wrong way.—Can you bring me again in the right way?"

Happily, he finds a friendly soul who feels sorry for him: "Yes, come I with me and I shall show you the way." Polyglot reaches the railroad station without any further vexatious incidents. Self-assured and yet engagingly unassuming, he formulates his reasonable request: "I beg you to give me a second class ticket." Then, not without a certain nervous anxiety: "Have I time to eat a breakfast?" But an authoritative voice advises him: "Now is the time to enter into the carriage!"

"In Waggon," Polyglot seems slightly annoyed at first. He states gloomily: "Our compartment is already too full." But with characteristic urbanity, he soon makes friends with his fellow-travelers. After the exchange of some polite phrases ("Ladies, will you allow me to light a cigar?—If you please, mister, your smoke is welcome!") the situation becomes more dramatic: "We are on the point of starting.—Now the engine is whistling.—Why does the train (Continued on page 110)

Illustration by
Joseph Cornell

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stop suddenly?—Ask you it to the conductor.—The train has get out the rails.—When shall we start again?—Do we change carriage?" But the panic calms down as everything seems to be nicely under control. Only Polyglot remains jumpy and irritable. When the conductor approaches him with his traditional, "Please, gentleman, your *tikket!*" our friend snaps, "I think to have lost my ticket. . ."; which turns out to be just an idea.

In the next paragraph, "On Arrival," we find Polyglot as brisk and dynamic as ever: "Here we are arrived;—Where is luggage?—Where is the custom house?—I please you to open the trunk.—Can you recommend me a good hotel?"

The stranger to whom Polyglot addressed the last question, answers, at once grandiosely and evasively: "Go alwaise to the best." Which our distinguished tourist would have done, anyway.

Polyglot is a man of the world, a man who knows what he wants and usually gets it. The number "On Hotel" is indeed one of his most impressive performances. Polyglot gives orders: "I want a front room with a bed in it.—Make immediately my room heat again.—Bring me a bottle of good and red wine.—Give me the key to my *hambre*.—Shut the windows, feel a little cold. . ."

He proves an accomplished host at an intimate dinner party. The conversation is sparkling. "Let us sit down or the sop will get cold.—I will thank you for a little of that fried fish.—What is there in that bottle?—Are mutton chops.—It is *rosolis*.—Uat dessert du iu want, gentlemen, *ui hav appls, pers, pices, eprieots, and also a littl greps.*"

Is that what the red and good wine does to Polyglot? He is in high spirits now—just in the right frame of mind for a little romance.

Polyglot's love story is presented under the baroque heading, "Fallings witt a person" [*Incontri con una persona*]:

"Good day, madam.—How do you do?—How beautiful you are.—Beautiful eyes have you.—Fascinating you are!—I love you. And you?—How old are you?—How content i should be to marry you.—Can I see you? When? where?—Have you a bride-groom?—Will you come with me to America? to England?—I shall be happy with you.—Will you smoke? . . . Oh, good *m-o-r-n-i-n-g*, dear friend!" (The italics are Polyglot's. My word of honor. I am quoting literally, not changing the sequence of sentences or anything.) "Indeed you have made mi a very *agrecable*.—Did you enjoy yourself yesterday evening?—Very much. [*Moltissimo*.]—Good appetite.—Thank you and good bye."

Who ever said that Latins are lousy lovers? Polyglot has what it takes. But stunning as his romance may be, my favorite piece is the one called "A Visit," which deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

"Somebody ringh the door.—Do o and see who it is.—Is mister at home?—Yes, sir.—No, sir.—I wish to speak with mister.—Please to come in.—How do you do my dear mister?—Pretty well, thank you, and how is the business?—Dis-

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What a remarkable dialogue! It is full of sinister undertones and fascinating suggestions. What kind of discreet affairs are going on in Polyglot's front room with a bed in it? Who is this secretive business friend who comes without ceremonies and takes his leave so abruptly?

Polyglot's character, complex and contradictory from the beginning, becomes more and more impenetrable as his drama approaches its end. The concluding chapter, which the author calls with sardonic irony "The usuals phrase," is indeed the most unusual tour de force.

At times Polyglot sounds like an impish madman, a kind of paranoiac Puck, who tries to bedevil the reader with a cataract of rampant gibberish: "Do you drink of tea?—We must go in that street.—It is very vexing.—Take care not to fall. What is the mutter with him?—What is the mutter with you?—Wat is the mitter with her?—Whence do you come?—Wence dos this woman come?—It is a great fortune.—It is seriously?—It is a great misfortune.—It is probably.—Do you understand what i said?—Let us try something else.—Look rather.—Look behind.—Do not do It.—Let cause do it.—Turn it wide.—Please.—Make *mè* the pleasure.—In vain.—It is difficult to understand words. . ."

Polyglot loves gossip; he whispers: "Some thing has been told to me.—Some friend is not faithful.—This woman wose rich.—This old man is her cousin.—Old as he is, he is still stout and strong.—He is a phisician.—Now he is departed.—Imagine.—All the town is speaking ebaut this evvent.—I am perplexed.—It is shame.—What woman do you know?—It is pity.—Do you know if this news is true?—I only know the newspafer speek of it.—Good news have arrived?—They say many things that are not true.—It would be well to know all the truth.—It would be well but it is not possible.—It is know (that) the King will came here this month.—All the better.—All the worst."

That's enough from Poly! His Majesty is taboo. No seditious talk will be tolerated. And what kind of secret message does he try to put over with those queer parentheses around the word "that"? He'd better shut up now! Or, to say it in his own bizarre words: "Hold your tongue do not make so muck noise!"

And Polyglot answers, "I hold my tongue to make you a pleasure."

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Aus einem Brief an Gregor-Dellin vom
3. Oktober 1968

... Besonders aber wünsche ich Ihre Aufmerksamkeit zu lenken auf "Little Polyglot". Photokopie liegt bei. Die Pièce ist - vielleicht - die komischste, die Klaus je zu Papier gebracht, - schon damals vergoss ich Lachtränen über sie und jetzt habe ich neuerdings Taschentücher durchlacht. Selbst der grimme Golo fand sich zutiefst erheitert und meinte, unbedingt sollte das Stückchen nicht nur in unseren Band, - man sollte es überdies schon vor-publizieren, am besten wohl in Ihrer "Zeit". Soviel "Englisch" können heute die Bunzdeutschen, und man schmeichelt ihnen auch noch, indem man sie merken lässt, dass sie es weit besser können als der Verfasser jenes Sprachführers. Was meinen Sie ?