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Concerning The Adventures Of The Irrepressible Mr. Poly.

Mann, Klaus

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Concerning The Adventures Of The Irrepressible Mr. Poly

By Fvt. KLAUS MANN
Staff Writer

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, Bookseller, 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 this 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 giv'ing you the one that is annulled."

The telegraph office is nearby "at the second floor, on your left 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 an hour ago.—When do you shut the office?—At midnight."

So far so good. The next episode is enigmatically 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."

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 way." 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, came 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."

"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 stop suddenly?—Ask you it to the conductor.—The train has got 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.

IN THE NEXT paragraph, "On Arrival," we find Polyglot as brisk and dynamic as ever: "Here we are arrived;—Where is the 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 awlwise to the best." Which our distinguished tourist would have done anyway.

Polyglot is a man of the world, 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 a key to my chambre.—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 soup will get cold.—I will thank you for a little of that fried fish.—What is there in that bottle?—Are nut-chops.—It is roisols.—Uat dessert du tu want, gentlemen, u have apples, pers, pieces, epicoats, and also a litt greps."

THE RED AND good wine has done something 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 with 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 ml a very agreeable.—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, his 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?—Discreetly.—And how is all your family?—Thank you all well.—May I offer you a cigaret?—Thank you not smoke.—I have come to visit you to speak to you about a business.—Peak, if you please.—Without any ceremonies.—Then good bye.—We meet again.—You see to be in a hurry.—I have in this moment many affairs. Another time I shall remain longer.—I thank you very much for your visit.—To this evening.—Good bye.—We meet again.—Good morning.—Good evening.—Good night."

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 implish 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?—What is the mutter with her?—Whence do you come?—Whence do this woman come?—It is a great fortune."

Polyglot loves gossip; he whispers: "Something has been told to me.—Some friend is not faithful.—That 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 about this event.—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 newspaper speak 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 come here this month.—All the better.—All the worst."

That's enough for 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 much noise!"

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

(This article appeared originally in "Town and Country.")