

Sample Translation

By Imogen Taylor

How It All Began

Alba Fantoni seems to be everywhere: on the spiral staircase, beneath the lamp over the card table, at the far end of the room by the parlour palm. She squeezes past guests, waving at people, and keeps turning her back on poor Freddie—but a bare back, you can say that for it, edged in black chiffon. Freddie, in his big bowtie, is standing between two gentlemen who are talking and puffing away; they dig their elbows into his ribs. In vain—he isn't listening. Alba Fantoni won't look his way.

And so he saunters over to the gramophone—the latest model—and puts on a record, Eddie Cantor singing 'You'd be surprised'.

The record spins. Fingers snap to the beat, sequined dresses shimmer; even the big bow over the waitress's behind glints in the light. The crowded room begins to sway; plump-cheeked ladies exchange incredulous glances and burst out laughing. The words are naughty, the guests feign outrage.

Already Alba Fantoni is at the gramophone, looking at Freddie with black-rimmed eyes. She turns slowly, presenting him with a slender hip, and holds the pose for a moment, chic and sophisticated. Her chiffon dress tightens, gleaming black like the gramophone horn. Alba, divine Alba!

She flings up her arms and her champagne glass flies in a high arc over people's heads. She calls out; her lips form the words 'ladies' choice!' Dapper men jump to their feet and throw themselves in her path.

She extends her bare arms behind dinner jackets and pomaded heads, reaching past everyone for the best dancer in the room. For Freddie!

Now she is with him, in the middle of the surging crowd. His hand is on her back, his fingers gently pressing her skin. He spins her around, away from the importunate men.

'Alba,' his lips say. 'Alba!'

He puts his cheek on hers and moves his lips to the words:

He's not so good in the crowd,

But when you get him alone

You'd be surprised...

They sway to the beat, her right hand in his left; they cut a path through the room as they dance. Soon, she too begins to move her lips:

*He doesn't look like much of a lover,
But don't judge a book by its cover.*

She laughs heartily, her eyes gleaming, and he laughs with her. At last! But already she's waving at another man, blowing him kisses, pointing to the armchair by the gramophone.

The dancers turn to look. They see the creepy Master Peters lay an enormous present across his lap and clasp it in his big hands.

Freddie holds Alba back. Please, one more dance.

She looks at Master Peters. He nods.

Freddie spins Alba around, putting himself on the receiving end of that sinister gaze—the kohl-rimmed gaze of the hypnotiser.

To everyone's delight, the silly turkey dance is next. The couples take their positions, hand in hand. They kick their legs back and forth, higher and higher, faster and faster, turned to each other in cheerful rivalry. They shake their arms, sway their hips, bend their knees, strut like cockerels.

Freddie's a sensation, funny and quick on his feet, with a gift for pulling faces. And he can tango. Lingering holds, brisk pirouettes, the woman over his knee in a falling arc, eyes locked—that smouldering gaze!

But now Dr Hines would like his fiancée back. His fat little hand with the signet ring taps Freddie on the shoulder; he takes Alba Fantoni by the arm and leads her away.

Freddie stretches, making his eyebrows shoot up, and follows the mismatched couple with his eyes. Does Alba look back?

She turns to him—and smiles.

That perfect, grave-faced smile. Who could resist?

Freddie bows to a lady who is asking him something, and goes after Alba.

In the dining room the chandeliers are bright, the table is laid. But where is Alba Fantoni?

Freddie returns to the ballroom, but Alba is nowhere to be seen. She's no longer with Dr Hines. He, too, is looking for her—he's about to call her—but as he turns, Master Peters appears before him and ceremoniously hands over the vast present that was on his lap.

It is bigger than Dr Hines and so heavy that he stumbles as he takes it in his hands. He puts it down. The guests laugh. What can it be?

Dr Hines rips open the paper. Master Peters warns him to be careful—it's valuable. Sheet after sheet of paper falls to the floor. The guests are beginning to make jokes, for the present is getting smaller and smaller—as small as Dr Hines.

It takes a long time to unwrap; the gramophone needle is running in the final groove.

The last sheets of paper fall away by themselves, like heavy bandages.

The gift!

The guests stare. Dr Hines stares too, his hand clapped to his mouth.

Freddie pushes his way to the front and sees what they see. It is Alba Fantoni turned to stone, a dainty sculpture in shining dark onyx. She is standing on tiptoe, arms pressed to her sides, little head thrown back like a bird taking flight. Her mouth, raised to the sky, is wide open, as if she were calling out, in tones of rapture, 'Ladies' choice.'

1

As the train from Milan rolled past tall palms and cedars, pulling into Santa Margherita Ligure two hours late at 16.34, they said warm goodbyes to the woman who had shared their compartment. This elegant signora with a grey blow-dry produced a tin of sweets, showed it to Loris and his nanny, then exclaimed, with pathos and long-drawn-out vowels: 'La mama!' and pressed it into Dora's hand.

La mama. Cheered by the melody of this word, Dora ruffled her son's hair—a gesture which, as always, he fiercely resisted.

Though it was only February, it was much warmer in the deserted station than on the train, and the sound of chirping swallows filled the arrival hall. A woman's voice, gearing up to announce yet another delay, warbled, 'Gentili signore e signori,' and they heard a last vociferous protest from *their* signora: 'Ma vaffanculo!' Oh, fuck off.

That too had a melody—a soaring melody, at odds with its meaning. This fitted nicely with Dora's understanding of language and literature.

She'd come to the right place!

Here, on the Ligurian coast, she would at last be able to write the 'ladies' choice' story. Just the sight of the date palms on the station terrace filled her with elation—little fireworks frozen in mid-movement, with slender fronds and symmetrical sprays of light. Everything was ready, present in abundance. It was the perfect place to write the story of Constantin Avis's sculpture.

She'd been carrying the story inside her for years, in all its detail. Every one of her books should have been this book—and yet each had turned into something else. Her

intermittent success with the public couldn't make her forget this; on the contrary, it only made her jittery.

That little sculpture of a woman calling, a bird taking to the air—whatever it was, it stood before her, within reach, and yet every time it eluded her. Why?

Pondering this question, Dora had stared out of the train window at the lines of the mountains until the scenery vanished abruptly into the dark cross-hatching of the Gotthard Tunnel and she saw only her reflection in the dim pane—her face serious, almost cross, her hands folded in her lap, while beside her Loris played Uno with his nanny.

'Ma-le co-lor,' the nanny exclaimed, putting down a red card.

Bad colour. What did she mean by that?

'Male color,' the boy, too, shouted. 'Male color.'

No, she mustn't look at the world like that, with that grim scowl on her face. What was art for, if not to sharpen your senses for a good and beautiful life?

Once out of the tunnel, the train passed through the sparse village of Airolo. Spring in mid-February—and soon it would be summer... On the window, a fleck of dust was smeared over the mountaintops—no, not dust; it was an alpine chough gliding through the air. Dora watched the bird, curious to see how far it would follow her, then lost herself in thoughts of Constantin Avis and the famous bird sculpture that he'd been forbidden to take into America duty-free. She thought about deceased patrons of the arts, about that old friend, money, that she never seemed to have enough of, and about the little 'ladies' choice' sculpture that Avis had been coerced into making...

Now, at last, she had committed to writing this book—had accepted a fellowship for that purpose from the Adolph Wehrli Foundation, which currently owned the sculpture.

'I can't tell you how many people envy you this fellowship,' the foundation's moon-faced director Dr Christoph Wehrli had said. 'You have ladies' choice!'

'And I've chosen Constantin Avis,' Dora had replied. 'I'm sure he was a decent dancer.'

She had decided to send Dr Wehrli a postcard from Liguria, to thank him again for his generous support of her work. Here she would be able to write in peace while her son enjoyed a holiday by the sea.

She felt her phone buzz in her pocket. As expected, the name *Regis* appeared on the screen. She ran her thumb over it, as though reading braille, and put the phone away again.

'Two-nil to Bergamo,' Loris said, standing in the door of the station café, from which a green light shimmered.

'That's great!' Dora said. 'Are you pleased?'

He thought for a moment, wrinkling his forehead at the two women waiting with the luggage. Then he said, 'Yes...yes, I am.'

And Dora stopped herself from ruffling his hair or kissing his forehead and simply said, 'So am I, Loris.'

As there was no driver to be seen in either of the two taxis outside the station, they went on foot—Dora first with the biggest suitcase, eight-year-old Loris in the middle, and the nanny, who went by the charming name of Macedonia, bringing up the rear in her little white hat.

There was a smell of jasmine and burnt leaves, the weirdly joyful smell of approaching spring. Mopeds sped past, too close for comfort, and the women called to Loris to walk closer to the wall. Just to be sure, Dora walked next to him. She had to go in the gutter, but already Via Pagana was opening up before them with its palazzi, and beyond it, between tall palms, rose the Hotel Metropole, a pale-yellow building with dark-green shutters. The shadow of a palm tree was cast onto the front of the hotel—quite still, as if painted.

Porters rushed up and took their luggage. Macedonia whispered to Dora that one of them had *Gigi Amoroso* on his name tag, like in the old song. Could that really be his name?

'L'amoroso,' Dora said. 'The song's called "Gigi l'amoroso", with a definite article: Gigi the lover.'

At reception she filled out forms for them all. The very best suite was waiting for them, the receptionist announced in a loud voice, as if the guests on the terrace needed to be informed too. Then, more discreetly, he congratulated the ladies on their foresight in coming off-season, when everything was so much more affordable.

So I don't look like the usual clientele, Dora thought. More, perhaps, like a fusty writer? With a brusque gesture she took the hotel key with its heavy fob and handed it to Loris. In late February, the receptionist said, it was too cold to swim in the sea, but you could walk in the hills, through olive groves and pinewoods, along the coast to Paraggi, Portofino or the Abbey of San Fruttuoso. Again she felt her phone buzz in her pocket. She accepted brochures and thanked the receptionist nervously, repeating her thanks when he told them of the ping-pong table in the garden. When a white poodle ran into the lobby with a tennis ball in its mouth, she became aware of her impatience and politely declined the welcome drink on the terrace. This prompted comments from the old ladies playing cards at the white-bedecked table, but they immediately understood when she explained that she had to attend to her son. They smiled at her and returned to their game.

The suite, right at the top, on the fourth floor, with a stunning view of the promenade, had three rooms—two bedrooms connected by a spacious sitting room. No sooner had they unpacked than the floor was strewn with Loris's clothes, toys and pirate books. Macedonia brought a vase of flowers from the sitting room into Dora's room—maybe it could go on the table by the window?

'Please don't put anything on my desk,' Dora called out.

Before they went out to find something to eat, Dora unpacked her notebooks and the photocopies of Avis's letters, diaries and sketches given to her by the Wehrli Foundation—as if that had been necessary. She glanced through them: the meticulous papers of a man who'd had plenty of time to write and think—and taken an obvious pleasure in his own handwriting. His elongated letters sloped to the right with large gaps between the words, the dots high above the i's.

She refrained from looking at her phone. Regis had written, but she would lock the phone in the bedroom safe and keep him waiting.

Only occasionally, when she was writing, would she think of him—yearningly.

2

When the RMS Mauretania, holder of the Blue Riband for speed, docked at New York's Chelsea Piers in the late morning of 12 May 1926 after only six and a half days at sea from Liverpool, a group of excited journalists and photographers were waiting on the quay—not for the young sculptor, Constantin Avis, but for an American actress who was returning home from Europe.

Dressed in a beige suit, Constantin climbed to the rapidly emptying upper deck to smoke a last cigarette on board—below him a throng of hats, caps, mufflers, waving arms and laden porters and, off to one side, the glare of exploding flashbulbs around a little white hat.

In these breathless and agitated times, Constantin wrote in his notebook, *my new luxury is not to let anyone rush me.* And he returned the book to his jacket pocket.

When the dock was almost empty and the porters came up on deck, they mistook him for a first-class passenger and charged an exorbitant amount for carrying his wardrobe trunk and unwieldy crate from his minuscule cabin near the engine room. Constantin, who was not familiar with New York, assumed it was the going price.

In Paris, he had left his small Montparnasse studio in Impasse Ronsin to his writer friend Jean Cordier who—rather awkwardly for Constantin—had insisted on paying rent.

Now he was on his way to see his generous American gallerist Max Milner, who had scheduled the opening of a big solo exhibition of his work for 17 May. This show would bring together all his sculptures from American collections with, at their centre, his most recent piece which Milner was planning to sell *for a record price, my dear fellow*. He had booked Constantin into a hotel in downtown New York, *above the clouds*.

But first, this *prince paysan*, as he was known to his Parisian friends, had to get through customs, where there were more costs coming his way.

'Occupation?'

'Artiste!'

'Artist?'

'Yes.'

'You're travelling alone?'

'Yes,' he said—and indicating the unwieldy crate, he added, 'just with the child.'

'The child?'

'The child in the crate.'

That did not go down well.

The crate was prised open and three customs officers stood in front of it, peering in, unsure how to go about removing all the packaging, the layers and layers of cloth around whatever was inside—something quite small, Constantin assured them.

He had to admit to himself that the artwork-as-child analogy had been trite, but the customs officers were in any case not willing to recognise as art the bronze bird they had extracted from the crate. They had a particularly rigorous notion of art, because art was allowed to cross their American border duty-free—but they had made up their minds to tax the polished bronze sculpture as a manufactured article. They put an especially low price on it, as if they were doing Constantin a favour.

'My bird is art!' Constantin Avis insisted, pressing his hat to his chest in a gesture of courtesy. He had no intention of paying duty on it.

'Pardon me, sir. It doesn't bear the slightest resemblance to a bird.'

'No, it isn't a bird,' Constantin said. 'It's the flight of a bird.'

The customs officers looked at each other and burst out laughing; the oldest one laughed so much he had to prop himself up on the crate. Constantin stared intently into this man's face—and then he too burst into uncontrollable laughter, head thrown back, mouth wide open. He laughed even louder than the customs officers, a ringing laugh that made two young men and a blonde woman poke their heads round the door of the shed to see what was going on. He laughed heartily—among other things because he'd discovered a striking resemblance between the elderly customs officer and dear old Uncle Coroi, his

surrogate father, of whom he had once made a bronze bust for public display. Thousands of miles, an ocean and a life away, and yet it was the same profile, the same hawk's nose and deep-set eyes, even the same Adolphe Menjou moustache that he had painstakingly reproduced, one hair at a time.

'I want everyone to recognise me, my boy!' his uncle had said. 'I'm not saying your other art's no good. But I want every idiot in the village to see that it's me.'

When the bust was finished, he'd convinced his uncle to let him patinate it so that it would look as superior as the statue of the voivode at the entrance to the village.

Together they had dug a pit outside the house, filled it with manure and placed the bronze statue on top, covered with a thin layer of soil. The soil had to be kept damp; Constantin encouraged the family to wet it with their urine.

'Are you pulling my leg, boy?'

'No, uncle, trust me. It's art!'

Auntie Coroi didn't need to be asked twice, but marched to the pit with brimming chamber pots, even in broad daylight. 'Don't take it personally!' she called across the garden to her husband—and she encouraged the grandchildren to relieve themselves at the pit.

Then the day came when they dug up the bust and attached it to a white marble plinth outside the village inn. All the villagers came to look. They could see it was Coroi! But for the first time they saw him as he really was—poised and dignified, of such stuff as the voivodes are made.

His name was carved into the marble plinth along with that of his nephew, Constantin Avis, who had grown up in the village and now lived in France, a celebrated artist in Paris and all over the world. It was a sunny day and two degrees warmer around the bronze statue.

Constantin took his leave of the customs officers, donning and doffing his hat several times, with particular attention to the one who so resembled his uncle. They were left marvelling at his equanimity. The fact was, he possessed the gift of recognising the familiar in the strangest places, and this gift gave him an easier time of things—at his uncle's, for example, where for years he had descended the cellar stairs to fetch wine for the guests, humming the village drinking songs to himself all the way—down, down, down and on to Paris; or in Paris itself, which he had reached after several weeks on foot, and where he had worked in the studio of a respected sculptor and then in the artists' colony in Montparnasse; or now, staring up at the towering—but not remotely frightening—skyscrapers of New York.

At a large puddle, he stopped to look at a high-rise reflected in the water, a slug of silt at the bottom, a shimmer of petrol. When a woman jumped over the puddle, her momentum, too, communicated itself to him, inciting him to bold, bright thoughts and visions of future greatness: of photographers waylaying him with their flashbulbs outside Milner's gallery; of the reunion with his sculptures from Atlanta, Washington and Chicago; of all the prominent artists who would surprise and honour him with their presence, come to admire the strange and wonderful bird of Constantin Avis, future star, capital artist. He even thought again of the actress who had left the ship to cheers—quite the thing in her little white hat.