The Day the Pink Snow Came to Cuneo

Marion Eristoff*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

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DON BENEDETTO sat at the window sipping his black coffee and munching on a piece of bread. "Hm," he thought, "another day down at that miserable factory." He had to take it out on someone — anyone.

"Maria, what's wrong with this butter? Are you trying to give me yesterday's leftovers?"

"No, no, Giovanni. Anna went and got it fresh from the shop this morning." Giovanni grunted.

"My poor darling," sighed Maria. She understood. "But tomorrow will be Sunday, and you will have a day of rest. More coffee?" He nodded. She bustled into the kitchen, and Giovanni sat there stroking his graying beard.

He had worked for the silk factory for over thirty years now. He'd made progress there, but he was tired and would have liked to rest — but you don't do that when you have a wife and five children. His dark eyes wandered out the window.

"Madonna Mia!" What was it? "Maria, Maria, come quick!" He rushed to the door and flung it open. "God have mercy on us! What is this!"

Maria was at his side tugging at his arm. "Giovanni, what does it mean?"

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by Marion Eristoff
"I don't know, Maria. I don't know."

"But snow is bad enough in April, let alone pink snow. It must be some kind of trick."

"It doesn't look like a trick, Maria. Let me see." He stretched his hand outside to feel this curious snow, but Maria grabbed him and pulled him away.

"No, no, caro mio. It might be evil. It might harm us." Suddenly her eyes darkened. "Oh, the children. Suppose they are not yet at school. Suppose it touches them, and they are struck dead?" She began to sob in panic.

"No, no, Maria. They must be in school by now." (Could this be a curse because he was dissatisfied and wanted to rest?) Giovanni held her hand tightly and wondered.

In Don Filippo's house next door, little Angelica had seen the strange sight first. "Mamma, mamma, come and look at the pretty pink outside!"

Livia Filippo came to the child. "What's the matter? Oh, my child, what have you done?"

"Nothing, Mamma. What is it?"

"I don't know, dear. I don't know." She prayed it wasn't the evil eye. But what was it? Snow? "Franco, Franco!"

"What are you yelling about, you crazy woman?"

"Look outside. Something horrible is happening."

"Oh, no. The Communists have finally succeeded. This must be a sign that they are taking over at last. Get down on your knees! We must pray for help."

Livia knelt down and dragged Angelica down with her. "Pray," she muttered to the child.

And, in the street, coming from the town fountain, hauling two jugs of water, came old Donna Grimaldi. She felt the snow first. "Will the winter never be over?" she complained. Then she saw it — pure pink.

"May the good Lord help me," she screamed. "Have I been such a horrible sinner? Do not deceive my eyes, oh my Lord!" But it was true.

She flung herself down on the cobblestones and beat her breast. The good, fresh water spilt out on the cobbles unnoticed.

And, in the little room in back of the church where the priest lived, the young girl, Antonella, who did chores for him, was sweeping out the room.
"Padre, Padre! Look! Look!" She clasped her hand over her mouth in terror. "God is punishing me for my sins!" She shrank back.

Fra Lupo got up from the table where he was working and gazed out the door. He was astonished. He grabbed Antonella by the shoulders. "It can't be anything very bad. There must be some logical explanation for it. Take hold of yourself."

"But it is my fault, father. I know it."
"But why, my dear?"
She lowered her head with shame. "Lorenzo and me."
"Well, you are engaged to be married. What wrong is there in that?"

He looked out at the pink. It was quite pretty. Maybe it was a good sign of some sort. Maybe his ardent praying for the redemption of the sinners of Cuneo was being answered. It was a soft, pretty pink.

"But, father, I have not been so good with Lorenzo."
He looked at her. "But what do you mean, child?"
"I gave myself to him last night," she whispered.
"Antonella," he sighed. He should be shocked, he knew, but he wasn't. These things were bound to happen with long engagements.

He put his hand on her head. "Go get Lorenzo and bring him here. I will hear your confessions and will marry you this coming Sunday."

"But, father, my dowry is not ready!"
"These are not the things that matter, Antonella. Go get Lorenzo and bring him here to me."
"But, father, how can I go outside now? God might strike me dead!"
"Nobody's going to touch you, Antonella. I will go with you." Fra Lupo put on his broad, black hat and took Antonella by the arm. They went outside.

Isn't it lovely, he thought, and he stretched out his hand to feel of it. Something so lovely can't be bad, he thought. Antonella shuddered at his side.

As they passed Don Benedetto's house, Giovanni called to him. "Padre, come out of the evil snow. You are not safe!"
"I'm safe, Giovanni. It is all right, and we're not being harmed."

"But, father, it might be radioactive fallout and you might explode from it." (This was his latest theory.)

Fra Lupo restrained a smile. His poor children. Then he heard people calling to him from the doorways on all sides. They were all excited. This shouldn't be, he thought. I don't understand what this is really all about, but my children are all panic-stricken. This should not be. He spoke.

"I'm going back to the church. You are all to come to the church as usual when I ring the bells."

He turned back to the church, sending Antonella by herself to get Lorenzo.

When they heard the bells ringing, they were frightened. But if Fra Lupo wanted them at the church, they must go. And, maybe he was calling them to explain what was happening. Maybe he would find the person who had sinned so much to bring this horrible thing on. They covered themselves very carefully so that they didn't get the dreaded snow particles on themselves. Never had the inhabitants of the little town of Cuneo ever rushed to church so quickly. They all sat down in the little chairs silently.

The only voice that broke the quiet was that of Marianna D'Avino, the little blind girl. "But, Mamma, what's wrong? Why are we here now? And why is it snowing in April?"

"Be quiet, Marianna. Father is going to speak to us."

Fra Lupo stood on the altar with his hands folded over his well-rounded middle. His large, pink face looked at them serenely. "But what can I say?" he thought. They were waiting.

"My dear children, I have asked you to come here because I see that you are troubled. You see a strange and beautiful sight outside, and you are frightened. Now, let me tell you something." (What could he say?) His words came slowly. "God gives us snow as a protective covering for our fields when it gets cold. But it isn't winter now, you say. True, it isn't. But we have had snow in April before. Perhaps God sometimes gives us snow in April to remind us that we are not our own masters—to remind us that in
spite of all our accomplishments, we must never take it upon ourselves to be too proud of these accomplishments. For without Him we would not have progressed at all. We predict the weather, we do innumerable things quite well, but this snow wasn't predicted. God is reminding us that we are imperfect. We can't do without Him, and we can't tell what He is going to do. We are His children, and we must remember. . .”

“But, father, why is the snow pink? Do you think it is a sign that the Russians are taking over the world?”

Another voice shouted, “You are a fool, Guglielmo. One of us has committed some terrible crime, and God is showing His anger for the bloodshed. That's why the pink snow, isn't it father?”

“Yes, yes,” shouted several voices.

Fra Lupo tried to think of something to say. How could he explain this to them? Even he was not sure of why the snow was pink. His thoughts were interrupted by a hysterical woman.

“Let the man or woman who has brought the wrath of God on us give himself up now before God takes vengeance on us all!”

“Brava, brava!”

They all fell silent, again. Fra Lupo forced himself to speak. “There is no sense. . .”

Livia Filippo suddenly screamed. “It's her fault,” and she pointed accusingly at Gerarda Menini.

“You me?” Gerarda snapped.

“You dare to say, 'Why me?',” Livia sneered. “After all your sneaky dealings with practically every married man in town!”

“If I can make a few men happy, it's not so bad. At least it is more than you do — always nagging at your poor man. How can you call yourself a wife?”

“Oh, my God,” thought Fra Lupo. “Had I only known. . .” He had thought the people confided in him as they should, but somewhere he had failed. Where? But he couldn't show his sad disappointment. He had to hide all this. This was the thing of the moment.

“Quiet, quiet,” urged Fra Lupo. “Quarreling like this will get us nowhere.”
"But, Father, we must find out who is to blame for this!"

Caterina Grimaldi stood up. "Father, forgive me. It is my fault. I killed my last three children by taking baths in hot oil."

Fra Lupo paled. Where had he failed? Why hadn't she come to him? Had they no faith in him? If these two matters came to light now, how many more were there? How many more who had not had the faith to come to him and entrust him with their cares?

Caterina continued talking. "I couldn't take care of them. I already had 13, so I killed my poor unborn babies. I thought it would be easier for my husband, may he rest in peace, because he was having enough trouble feeding so many mouths as it was. But when he found out, he was so full of grief that he killed himself. That's why he killed himself. So you see, Father, I am to blame." Here eyes pleaded to him for mercy.

Fra Lupo's head had sunk down during this confession so that they didn't see how hurt and shocked he was. Oh, he knew it was human to sin, but if they had only come to him. And they shouted these sins out to the world now! Oh, God!

And they all sat still for a moment, and then they began yelling at one another.

And there were so many stories — so many sins — so many to blame for this terrifying pink snow.

Fra Lupo couldn't listen. The words of sin were darts being thrown at his heart. He wanted to rush out into the fresh air. A little air might give him back his mind. It wouldn't ease anything, but maybe he would be able to think more clearly.

All of a sudden the narrow door at the back of the church opened, and in came a stranger. He was fashionably dressed and looked toward Fra Lupo. They all turned around to look at him.

Fra Lupo's mind began functioning again. The change had eased the numbness. He had to speak. "Can we help you?" he offered.

The voice that spoke was the voice of an educated man. No dialect — pure Italian. "I do not mean to intrude, father, but I have come as a representative of the press from Savona. I have been sent to find out some of the reactions of the
people of your town to the pink snow. I have gone to several of the houses, but I see that you have all the people with you here. Might I speak with you and them about this?"

Anything, anything, thought Fra Lupo, to delay what was going on. He nodded for the man to continue.

“Well then, you know, of course, that the reason you are having pink snow is that there have been some severe sand storms in the Sahara these past few days, and the prevailing winds have blown particles of the pink desert sand into your area. It is, of course, unusual that the only town that is being affected by this is yours.”

They all stared at the stranger in silence. Some of the women began to sob.

“I told you there was nothing to it,” Don Benedetto mumbled to his wife.

“May God be cursed for letting me make a fool of myself,” shouted Donna Grimaldi.

Gerarda ran over to Livia and raised her arm in anger. “You big-mouthed, stupid donkey! You’ve ruined me. What will the padre think of me now?”

The cursing and lamenting went on. Why had they opened their mouths? Their sins lay bare on the floor now. That damned snow had done it. Oh, why had they been so stupid and honest?

The poor people of Cuneo. They had had snow that day — pink snow.