

The Passionate Thief, Part II

Mario Monicelli, Dir. (1960)

To the accompaniment of lively rhythm and blues music, a man walks down a corridor hung with bright neon signs. Even the walls seem alive with light. He's wearing a pale jacket and a dark shirt, with a white trench coat slung over his shoulder. This is Lello (Ben Gazzara). As he walks, he adjusts his tie and checks his watch. He arrives at his meeting place: a shoeshine stand. A burly man (Fanfulla) sitting there greets him with a little wave.

"Hi, Spizzico," Lello says to him.

Spizzico gets right down to business: "The agreement is clear. Gold and jewels. Stuff that can be melted. No big stuff; I won't take it." Kneeling, the attendant continues shining Spizzico's shoes, a cigarette between his lips.

Lello is a little offended. "I don't go to ballrooms for mattresses and blankets! Small stuff, don't worry!"

"His work is high class!" interjects a man there named Pecori'.

Lello bums a cigarette from Spizzico's sidekick. Without asking permission, he takes the cigarette right out of the shoeshine man's mouth to light his own.

He asks Spizzico, "Did you find me an assistant?"

"It's not easy, you know. You're asking for someone special, in black tie. There aren't many people suited for high class places. And those few don't trust you. Maybe because they don't know you."

"Well, I was out of town."

"Maybe you were inside?" Pecori' says, insinuating he's been in prison.

Lello flicks his cigarette at him, without even looking. Amazingly, the ash hits him square in the face.

"Don't be a buffoon!"

Lello explains to Spizzico, "I've been abroad for three years."

"We know. You're cool! Making the rounds of the nightclubs on New Year's Eve is a good idea. In fact: excellent!" He gets up and Lello takes his seat. Spizzico goes on, "But wouldn't it be better if you went alone? So you don't have to split with anyone?"

No, no, Lello shakes his finger. "I withdraw and pass on. I never keep the stuff on me. It's a nervous thing. If I don't pass it on immediately, I'm fucked."

The shoeshiner interjects. "Want a guy who looks good? Clean record, and with a tailcoat? Umberto Pennazzuto."

"Who? Infortunio?"* asks the sidekick, grimacing.

Spizzico approves: "Not bad! Not bad!"

* This nickname means 'accident.'

"Infortunio? Who is that?" asks Lello.

"He's an extra at Cinecittà. And every time, he has an accident on purpose, just to get the medical insurance. Get it?" explains Spizzico.

Lello is not convinced. “Then, he’s a bum.”

Spizzico asks sardonically, “Who were you expecting to assist you while stealing: Dante Alighiero?”*

*In mocking Lello’s pretences, Spizzico himself mispronounces the name of the great Italian poet, Dante Alighieri.

Next we see Umberto Pennazzuto (Totò) – otherwise known as Infortunio – in his narrow bed, under three portraits from his life in show business. He puts a cigarette butt in the holder and lights it. His landlady (Marcella Rovena) bursts into the room.

“Well?” he asks.

“Gotta clear the room!” she says impatiently. She speaks with a Venetian accent. Up to this point almost all the characters have spoken with a Roman accent. “There’s going to be a dance here tonight! You won’t have anything at all to protest with three month’s rent to pay, will you?”

A child comes skipping in: “Pennazzuto, telephone!”

“Right now!” he says in his Neapolitan accent, and jumps out of bed to make his escape.

The next room is decorated for the New Year. Umberto picks up the phone. “Hello?... Spizzico who?... Ah, yes, yes. Greetings... Of course I have a dinner jacket. What sort of job would it be?” He listens for a moment and then chuckles. “And you call that a job?... I know, I know, but it’s not for me.” Now the landlady and her daughter come into the room to decorate. Umberto continues, “It’s not my thing. Anyhow, I happen to have plans. A lady... I’m sorry. If I change my mind, I’ll call. Happy New Year and goodbye.”

The landlady comments, “That’s great! We have the luxury of refusing work now, do we?” We see her in a mirror as she scolds him. Bending over, he dials a number.

When they answer, Umberto says, disguising his voice and speaking in broken Italian, “Hello! I be great director Cecil B. DeMille. To want to speak to great actress Tortorella!”

At the other end of the phone, Gioia replies, “Umberto, Cecil B. DeMille is dead anyway, poor soul. Will you stop it?” Wrapped around her head, a white towel towers over her.

“You recognized me, huh? But you almost fell for it, tell the truth!”

“Yes, okay,” she sighs.

Umberto gets to the point: “I had a *great* idea! Shall we spend the evening together?”

She raises her eyebrows, saying nothing.

Behind Umberto, we see a beautiful double line of lighted windows. Behind Gioia, sitting in bed in his shirt, vest and hat, her grandfather (Carlo Pisacane) is playing solitaire.

Umberto says, “Hello? Tortorella, are you there? Are you there? I was saying: shall we spend New Year’s together, like last year? It brings us good luck!”

“But what good luck, Umbe’? I’ve never seen a year like this one!” she declares, gesturing as she speaks. “Come to think of it, maybe it was actually you who gave me the jinx!” She cackles.

“Don’t get mad. Anyway, even if I wanted to, I can’t, you know, because I’m busy tonight.” She pats the turban that hides the spectacular thing she has been planning to do with her hair. “Yes, I’m going out.

In a group, with a lot planned.” Gioia shows off that she has fancy friends.
“Couldn’t I come too?”

“Well, ... maybe... But I’m warning you: it’s eight to ten thousand lira.” He doesn’t respond. “Hello? Are you there?”
“Well, good night and happy New Year.”

She replies, “Goodnight!” and hangs up.
Umberto rubs his hand on his chin, thinking. Then he picks up the phone to make another call.

Colombini and his friends are at the Esedra Fountain. A little car jammed with people comes screeching up and pulls to a sudden stop right in front of them, almost running them over. Mimì and others climb out, amid a chorus of outrage: “Are you crazy?!” “Want to kill us right on New Year’s Eve?!”

There’s bad news: “We’re thirteen!”
“Why?” asks Mimì. “Tortorella said she would come.”
Colombini explains, “Yes, but Amapola is not.”
His friend scolds him again, “Colombini! Damn you and damn me when I listen to you! You shouldn’t have invited Tortorella!”
Colombini defends himself, “What are you saying? If you hadn’t nagged me, I wouldn’t have called her.”

A man standing between them interrupts their bickering. “Alright, Tortorella will stay home. Mimì, go phone her.”
“Are you crazy? At this hour? You guys should have thought of it before.”

Colombini has an idea. He asks, “What time is it?”
The man says, “It’s almost five past ten.”
“Five past ten...” muses Colombini.
His friends get it. “So it’s past ten. You know what?”
They look from side to side at each other, then suddenly they all get it. They make a mad dash for their cars, laughing. “Let’s go!” “Let’s hurry!” “Out of here!”
The three cars circle around the fountain and then take off like bats out of hell.*

*In the Italian on the blog, we have said “like hares.”

As they leave the fountain, Gioia arrives in her taxi.
When she gets out of the car, we see that her hair is blonde: she really has done something new with herself for the New Year!
She walks by the fountain, looks in her purse, adjusts her elegant white fur. Then she looks around, her back to the fountain, hands crossed, waiting. It’s a lonely sight.

Then she sits down, disconsolate, muttering, “What if I’m at the wrong fountain?” In a long shot, we see the fountain’s bright stream of water, the reflected glare from the street, and the neon letters of the city in the background. She’s the only figure in sight.

Meanwhile, Lello is also waiting – waiting for his accomplice. Looking around, he tosses his cigarette away. As he’s checking his watch, we see Umberto walking down the stairs behind him, wearing a tuxedo.

He says to Lello, “Good evening, and I’m sorry about the delay.”

Lello doesn’t say a word. He just looks him up and down. Confused, Umberto then looks *himself* up and down to see what the problem is. A stain? A moth hole?

“But, excuse me, are you Lello?” he asks. He uses the formal *lei* even though they are about to be partners in crime.

Lello gestures at the tuxedo in disgust: “But what are you wearing?” He doesn’t stand on ceremony; he uses the informal *tu*.

“Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why’? Don’t you see yourself?” Lello answers, hands together as if in prayer, but moving them up and down: the Italian gesture for ‘what the hell?’. “And you still ask why?”

“Of course I ask why! When Spizzico called me, he said to wear black tie. And what’s this?” he asks, proudly.

“A waiter, you look like to me!”

“Oh, no, no! My dear friend!” Umberto lifts up his hands. “Sir, a real gentleman – to be noticed at a grand evening – wears a tux.”

Lello, the pickpocket, explains the nature of the evening’s endeavor and his view of the proper attire for a fancy evening out. “Aside from the fact that you should not stand out – the more unnoticed you are, the better – does a real gentleman go out without a coat?”

“I’ve got one, but it’s brown. And so, with the tux it doesn’t look right. This way, I look like a gentleman that’s just gotten out of his car,” Umberto explains. The light gleams from his carefully brilliantined back hair.

Lello walks away and Umberto follows, remarking, “Trust me, I know all the tricks of men’s clothing!” He is so short that he has to scamper so as to keep up with Lello’s long strides.

Without turning around, Lello asks, “Do you know what to do?”

“I’ve got the general idea.”

“You must stay close at hand, but without showing that we’re together.”

Somehow, Lello is walking at a normal pace, completely at his ease, while Umberto is practically running to keep up with him.

Lello complains, “As soon as I take something I put it into your pocket. But you have no pockets! How are you going to do it?”

“It’s all right! I have a secret pocket! I used this tux when I worked as the assistant of the magician Castelli.” It’s the tux from a magic act! Then he tries to clarify his assignment. “So, I’ll leave the place right away and wait for you outside, do I have it right?”

They've stopped walking. Impatiently, Lello pokes his finger into Umberto's chest. "No, you don't have it right at all! Go to the bathroom and hide the objects in the toilet tank. Got it? Then come back to me."

Umberto is impressed when Lello hands him a ticket to the night's event: "Oh, great! You've thought of everything!"

"I'm going ahead. In five minutes, come in and take your position stand by the third pillar," Lello instructs him. "Stay there until I signal you. After five minutes. You got a watch?"

"No."

Lello smacks Umberto brusquely, tells him to count to five hundred, and walks away.

Umberto rubs his hand where Lello smacked him. "What manners!" he mutters, and starts counting – on his fingers, seemingly a motif of the film by now. He walks around keeping on counting. Partygoers in formalwear stream past him.

A taxi pulls up behind him and a voice – Gioia's – calls, "Umberto!" He looks around, without recognizing her. She gets out and walks over, but stops short at the sight of him, eyes closed, counting on his fingers.

After observing for a few moments, she calls him with a "oh!" He opens his eyes but doesn't recognize her and she bursts into laughter. "I'm Tortorella, aren't I?"

"No! Tortorella!" he claps his hands together, delighted to see her. "But have you gone blonde?" She turns to show off her new look. "Yes! I look good, don't I?"

While Gioia is distracted by something offscreen, Umberto comments, "How pretty. You know who you look like? Kim Novak!"

"And to me, you look like a crow," she replies dryly.

Umberto has resumed his counting. She asks, "What are you doing?"

He changes the subject. "I was saying... You're blonde!"

"You already said that."

"Are you going with your friends?"

"Eh, yes... no, I'm not going anymore and it's your fault, okay?"

"Because of me?!" Umberto puts his hand on his chest.

"Of course, because when you called me, you made me waste so much time that when I arrived for the appointment, no one was there anymore." He spreads his hands in a helpless gesture, but she goes on, "Happy now? I'm coming from the Hungarian restaurant, but they weren't there either." Primping her hair, she continues to gaze at something offscreen.

"I'm glad," he says.

"Why? Are you alone too?"

"Well, yes."

They are together, but they look a little sad and lonely for a moment.

Then abruptly, Gioia grabs Umberto's arm and drags him forward. "Then let's go have a good time together."

He stops her. "I could slap myself! I'd break my head! I could punch myself in the eye."

"Why?" she asks.

“I was born with a jinx on me!”

“I know that! But...”

“Tortorella, I didn’t want to tell you – I’ll tell you.” He takes out the ticket for the event. “I have a commitment here.”

“Oooh. With who? With a woman?”

“More or less.”

“And you would kick yourself for that? Ha!”

She goes on, “If you prize being with me so much, let’s go in anyway and when this lady comes...” She strikes up a dance pose and snatches the ticket from his hand. “We’ll take turns dancing with you. Come on, hurry!” She starts to go.

He grabs her arm, “No! Listen! Let’s go somewhere else. Let’s have a nice pizza, huh?” He does not want her to know about his arrangement with Lello.

Gioia lets out a fierce laugh, as if betrayed: “I’m not even supposed to see her? Who knows what a ray of sunshine she must be!” She turns to go inside and he takes her arm. “I won’t throw a jealous fit. She can’t be any worse than what I imagine. Let’s go inside, who knows the friends I might find!” she exclaims, trying to sound sophisticated. “I might let you off the hook right away.”

In the background, leaning on a stone column, a figure is watching this exchange. He rubs his chin, as if puzzled.

Tortorella dispenses with her sophisticated tone now and cries out in Roman dialect, “Let’s go Umbe’, I want to have fun tonight!” and stalks off, holding his ticket. Umberto looks miserable.

Then the figure in the background asks, “Madame, what are we going to do?” It’s the taxi driver! She keeps walking and yells to Umberto from offscreen, “Pay for the taxi!”

“Who me?”

“You, you!”