

The Passionate Thief, Parte V

Mario Monicelli, Dir. (1960)

In the darkness of the EUR district, the dance hall appears as a horizontal band of light. All through the building, festive figures in party hats are moving in time to the music. They throw streamers in the air, up toward luminescent globes suspended from the ceiling.

For quite a while, Lello has been on the prowl, attempting with little success to ply his trade. Unwillingly, Umberto trails him at a distance, waiting for a signal.

Gioia arrives on the back of a motorcycle. The driver announces, “Madame, we have arrived!” He’s a friend of the subway conductor.

“One moment,” Gioia murmurs. “I have to thaw first!” She’s leaned into him, for warmth. For a moment, she seems to be frozen in place. She has newspapers stuffed in her dress as insulation, but they can’t have helped much. She begins shivering uncontrollably. We note that she no longer holds the bottle of champagne.

We see Lello and Umberto leaving the dance hall. With its glass wall as backdrop, they descend a flight of stone stairs, past monumental columns. As usual, Lello is gripping Umberto’s arm, to keep him from escaping.

They catch sight of Gioia.

She’s in the parking lot, pulling newspaper from her clothing.

Lello tells her, “Madame! You vanished! We took the wrong train.”

“I know!” she replies regretfully.

Umberto takes this opportunity to run away. He dashes across the wet street and arrives in front of a giant mansion, where paired windows shine out like the eyes of a nocturnal creature. Up on a balcony, a few individuals are setting off flares.

Umberto sits down on a bench in front; at last he is free.

But then Lello comes running up.

Gesturing with one hand, Lello asks, “So, are you happy?”

“Here he is again!”

“You ruined my evening! So tell me: are you happy now?”

“Me?”

“Yes! You and that nitwit. Now I see why they call you ‘Accident’. You bring really fucking bad luck!”

Offended, Umberto comes to his feet. “Yes, I bring bad luck! I’m unlucky!” he answers, gesturing broadly with a finger. “Where I walk, not a blade of grass grows. I’m like Attila the Hun!”

Enraged, Lello clutches Umberto and wags a finger in front of his face. “I’ll mess you up!”

“Let me go!”

“I’ll kill you!”

Just then Gioia arrives and says lightly, “Young men! Why are you arguing? Why did you run off? Relax, guys. It’s still early. What beautiful thing do we want to do, Lello?”

Umberto – thumb and forefinger together in the Italian gesture for ‘end of discussion’ – says impatiently, “Tortore’, at midnight the night bus comes which takes you right home!”

Positioning the black gloved hand beside her mouth as if speaking privately, Gioia says loudly, “Umberto, go away. We’re fed up with you.” Then she turns to Lello and asks, “So, what do we want to do?”

Without saying anything, Lello raises his hands and leans towards Gioia to strangle her. Umberto jumps in to save her, just as a deafening bang from above stops them all in their tracks.

They look up towards the source of the sound, and the camera pans up, following their gaze. On the balcony of the mansion, the elegantly dressed people have begun setting off fireworks.

After a rapid descent, one hits Gioia, and she leaps into Lello’s arms, screaming, “I’m on fire!”

Umberto turns to the balcony and yells up, “Delinquents! Murderers! Criminals!”

The people on the balcony withdraw, leaving clouds of smoke behind them.

Then Umberto speaks. “I’ve got an idea.”

“Yeah, I’d have the idea to bust their heads!” suggests Gioia.

“I have an idea! It’s as if you won the lottery. Listen to me! Come here...” He whispers something to her.

Two men come running through a wrought iron gate and look down at our three protagonists from an ornate porch.

Gioia falls into Lello’s arms yelling, “My God! My eardrum!”

Umberto points out to his friends, “Article 117, damage to third parties!”

Gioia, the actress, keeps yelling, “My ear drum! My ear drum!”

Umberto turns now to the men on the balcony. “Burnt fur, injured ear drum. Extremely grave damages! I want your personal information to delegate my lawyer to settle the matter.”

Behind him, Gioia continues her histrionics, as Lello hugs her and pats her head, mimicking horror at her injuries.

In a foreign accent, a man in black tie leans over and says, “Terribly sorry. We’d better see the injuries and damages immediately.”

Umberto turns around to his audience of two, very happy with his own performance.

The men on the balcony confer. Not seeing a prompt resolution, Lello has a better idea, more in the line of his particular expertise. He drops Gioia with a thud.

“Do you mind, Professor?” he says to Umberto, demonstrating respect for his companion’s supposed knowledge, and then to Gioia, “Forgive me, dear.”

Turning to face the gentlemen, he says, “I think the blast just deafened her a little and nothing else. Right, dear?”

“What are you saying, dear?”

“All that will take is for the lady to have a drink to feel better. The gentlemen would of course be happy to offer a glass of cognac and their apologies.”

Umberto murmurs to Gioia to ignore Lello, who in turn tells her to ignore Umberto. They bicker quietly back and forth as the gentlemen on the balcony confer in turn.

At last, a white-haired man in white tie says to Umberto, “So, Professor, if you would like to bring your wife into my house...”

Gioia states immediately that she is not Umberto’s wife. Lello clarifies that he is her husband. This is a lie that she can live with! Umberto then trails a little behind the them as they walk arm in arm.

Climbing the steps to the entrance, Lello is smiling because this is just the type of place where he can ply his trade. Gioia smiles because she can play-act as Lello’s wife for the evening. Only poor Umberto frowns, knowing that he’ll have to assist as Lello quietly fleeces the guests at the party.

In the foyer, marble statues stand in niches in the walls and a glass chandelier gleams. An older couple appears at the top of the stairs. The woman wears a tiara. In German, the man says to her, “Come here please. Something has happened, but nothing serious.” He indicates our trio, who seem a little in awe. “We invited these people.”

Gioia murmurs, “She’s got a crown! She must be a former queen!”

Descending the stairs, the man greets them, saying to Gioia in German-accented Italian, “I hope that you didn’t hurt yourself.”

He leads them up to meet his wife. Umberto inclines his head soberly in a little bow. Gioia, thinking the woman must be royalty, curtsies.

The man escorts them to a large room with an even more ornate chandelier, where quiet music plays. A waiter in formalwear offers a tray with glasses of champagne, and Umberto takes two. Over at the buffet with Gioia, Lello surveys the guests. He looks very pleased.

Lello and Gioia raise their glasses in a wordless toast, looking into each other’s eyes.

“Why did you say that I was your wife?” Gioia asks. “There’s a slight age difference. I could be your older sister.”

“But which sister? Let’s not talk nonsense.”

One of the hosts comes over with a proposal, “Do you want to get revenge against the bad fireworks by lighting all the big flares?”

“Oh, yes!” Gioia replies. To Lello, she says, “Put my purse somewhere, anyway, no one will steal it here. I don’t think there are any thieves.” She laughs at the very idea.

With Gioia chattering in the background as she lights the flares, we see Lello take the purse, briefly fingering the clasp, and deposit it beneath a candelabra.

Adjusting his cuffs, primed for action, Lello is about to enter the throng of guests oohing and aahing at the flares, when Umberto takes his arm.

“Listen, you!” he tells him. “You came into this house, using as a shield a lady who is a very esteemed friend of mine. Be careful, huh? And remember that these are Germans. I know very well the troubles I had during the Nazi occupation.”

With a gesture, Lello brushes him off and starts to walk away. But Umberto stops him again, saying, “I’ll report you! All I have to do is tell Tortorella one word, and –”

But Lello has his professional pride and sense of responsibility: “But what impression will we make on friends, when they find out that we were in a house like this without taking anything?”

“And who gives a damn?”

“You know what? You’re really a fucking bastard. You take advantage of the fact that I can’t do anything alone.”

“Yes, I’m taking advantage of it, okay?” Umberto nods. The lights come back on.

Gioia is holding court, describing her background in the theater and her move to cinema. By her account, she might be a major movie star. She starts to talk about Lello and what a great actor he would be. In fact, she’ll take it up with her director. Lello smiles, but says nothing, waiting for her to shut up.

Finally Umberto breaks in. In an effort to get the attention off of Lello, he talks about his own career in vaudeville, speaking in beginner-level Italian so that his hosts will understand. Ma Gioia interrupts him. “Umberto, dear, why do you expect they would be interested in that!”

“Pardon, fraulein!” he replies graciously, combining French and German.

“That vaudeville stuff, forget it!” She abruptly changes the subject: “What a lovely house! So many lights! I don’t know; I feel like I’m in the Vatican.”

She walks over to the hostess, in her tiara, saying, “I even feel a sort of emotion, ma’am, because this reminds me of when I saw the Pope.”

In a quavering voice, the woman replies in broken Italian, “If you to want to see the house...”

“May we?”

“Yes! Be my guest!”

“Thank you! Thank you so much! Thank you!” She does another awkward curtsy.

Gioia takes Lello’s arm and off they stroll to see the house, under the eye of a marble bust. Umberto trails not far behind.

When Gioia mutters, “Umberto, you need to go away a little bit now,” he just shrugs. After all, he’s got to stick with Lello, either to make sure that no robbery occurs or to receive the loot. And he wants to protect his friend Tortorella, though she’s not being kind to him.

It seems that armless busts are watching them wherever they go. And apparently, Umberto has left them after all.

Gioia asks Lello, “Do you like classical music?”

“You know what I like,” he replies. Then he picks up a cigarette case, looks it over, and it puts it back down.

As soaring violin music plays in the background, Gioia comments, “I’m afraid that all this champagne on an empty stomach makes me dizzy.”

“I’ve drunk almost nothing, but I feel dizzy too.”

As chamber music plays, they drink and flirt, while Lello surreptitiously cases the joint. Gioia muses, “Who would ever imagine beginning the year with a husband in a house filled with princes! *Mamma mia!*” Lello picks up another item, puts it back down and walks away, as Gioia says, “What a good idea you had to get us invited!”

Something across the room has caught his eye: a small statuette. “You know that an object like this is worth a nice bunch of 10,000 lira bills?”

She agrees, “Of course! Look at this stuff! What paintings!” She walks around the room, pointing at last to a portrait on the wall: “Look at this, Lello!”

“No. It’s too cumbersome.”

“What?”

In another room, Lello notices a display case. “Ah, there it is,” he says. “My true passion! Small stuff, and beautiful.” He lightly touches one of the objects on the glass shelves.

Tiny statuettes seem part of the conversation, some observing, others looking away.

“Oh, I really understand you!” she replies. “I like it a lot too, you know. Just because it is useless. After all, the true lord stands out for this: his passion for useless things.”

Lello chuckles. “You know, you’re not stupid after all. I want to tell you something else...” He leans in to kiss her.

“What are you doing?!” she exclaims. “You’re going too fast. Young man, let’s try to keep our heads. I’m not one of those with a lot of illusions.”

As they stand nose to nose, the camera pans down to the shelf of objects where Lello’s mind – and hands – actually are focused.

“What kind of talk is that? I like you,” he says softly. “And you’re not indifferent towards me. It’s New Year’s!” He puts his hand on her shoulder and goes on, “Why don’t you come to my house? We’ll get drunk and tomorrow you tell me how you feel.”

In the background, we see a tall man peering towards them.

“Let’s go dance,” Gioia says, leading Lello into yet another chandeliered room. The tall man observes them discreetly as they dance.