

I Am Edmond Dantès! Umberto Eco

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SOME UNFORTUNATES HAVE been initiated into literature reading someone like, say, Robbe-Grillet. You can read Robbe-Grillet only after you have understood the age-old narrative structures he violates. To enjoy the lexical inventions and distortions of Gadda, you need to know the rules of Italian and be familiar with the fine Tuscan of Pinocchio.

I remember that when I was a child, I found myself in continual competition with a friend from an educated family who read Ariosto, and I spent what little money I had on a copy of Tasso from a secondhand bookstall to keep up with him. I dipped into it from time to time, but was secretly reading *The Three Musketeers*. The boy's mother, visiting our house one evening, spotted the incriminating book in the kitchen (future men of letters did their reading in the kitchen, propped against a kitchen cupboard, with our mothers shouting at us that we would ruin our eyes and ought at least go outside and get some fresh air). She was scandalized: "But how can you read trash like this?" That same lady, it should be said, told my mother that her idol was Wodehouse, whom I also used to read, and with great enjoyment but—one lightweight author against another—why was Wodehouse more noble than Dumas?

A century-old sentence hung over the serialized novel, and its demise was threatened not only by the Riancey Amendment of 1850, which imposed a punishing tax on newspapers that published these feuilletons, but also by the general opinion among God-fearing people that feuilletons were the ruin of families—they corrupted the young, drove adults to communism, and undermined the throne and the altar. See, for example, the two-volume *Études critiques sur le feuilleton roman*, almost a thousand pages that Alfred Nettement devoted in 1845 to this devilish literature.

And yet it is only through the serialized novel that, from early childhood, we learn about classic narrative devices. Here they appear in their purest form, often brazenly, but with an overwhelming mythopoeic energy.

And so I would like to consider not a particular book, but a particular genre (the feuilleton) and a specific device: anagnorisis, or recognition.

If it were necessary to remind you, as I have just done, that the feuilleton makes use of timeless narrative devices, then we would cite Aristotle (*Poetics*, section 1452 a-b). Anagnorisis is the "change from ignorance to knowledge," and in particular the recognition of one person by another, as when a character unexpectedly discovers (by another person's revealing it, or by discovering a necklace or a scar) that someone else is his father or son or worse still, as when Oedipus realizes that Jocasta, the woman he has married, is his mother.

One reacts to anagnorisis either with a simple willingness to play the narrator's game or in accordance with the rules of narrative. In the second case, some think the effect is in danger of being lost, but that is not correct—and to prove this I will make a few observations about narrative before turning swiftly to look at the miracles of anagnorisis at first hand.

A double anagnorisis must take not only the character but also the reader unawares. This surprise may have been prepared through hints and suspicions or it may arrive quite unexpectedly even for the reader, and

the way these subtle, almost imperceptible clues or sudden coups de théâtre are handled depends on the skill of the narrator. A simple anagnorisis, on the other hand, occurs when a character is taken completely by surprise at a certain revelation, but the reader already knows what is going on. Typical of this category is the multiple unmasking of Monte Cristo to his enemies, which the reader has been eagerly awaiting since halfway through the book.

In a double anagnorisis, the reader identifies with the character, sharing his joy and suffering as well as his surprises. But in simple anagnorisis the reader projects his own frustrations or hopes of revenge onto the character, whose secret he already knows or can guess, and anticipates the turn of events. In other words, the reader would like to deal with his enemies, his boss, or the woman who has walked out on him in the same way that Monte Cristo does. "You used to despise me? Well then, now I shall tell you who I really am!" And he licks his lips, waiting for the final moment to arrive.

A useful element for the successful outcome of an anagnorisis is disguise: by removing his mask, the person disguised increases the other characters' surprise; and the reader either shares that surprise or, having seen through the disguise, enjoys the surprise of the unsuspecting characters.

For the two types of anagnorisis there are then two sorts of degeneration—when the recognition is redundant or pointless. Revelation is, in fact, a currency to be spent thriftily and should provide the clou to a respectable plot. The case of Monte Cristo, who reveals his identity many times and, in turn, gradually learns of the plot in which he has been victim, is a rare and masterly case of revelation that, though used numerous times, is no less satisfying for it. In the popular feuilleton, however, since revelation "sells well," it is repeated to the point of excess, thus losing all dramatic power and acquiring a purely consoling function, in the sense that it provides a drug that the reader comes to depend on and cannot do without.

The overuse of this device reaches extreme proportions when the revelation is obviously completely pointless in terms of plot development, and the novel becomes stuffed with it purely for publicity purposes, so that it can be promoted as the ideal serial novel and worth every penny. A patent example of pointless moments of anagnorisis, one after the other, is Ponson du Terrail's *Le forgeron de la Cour-Dieu*. Note that the pointless anagnorises in the following list are those marked with an asterisk (and, as you will see, they are in the majority).

This is the story: \*Dom Jérôme reveals who he is to Jeanne; Dom Jérôme reveals who he is to Mazures; \*the comtesse des Mazures, from Valognes's description, recognizes Jeanne as the sister of Aurore; \*from the portrait in the small box left to her by her mother, Aurore recognizes Jeanne as her sister; Aurore, while reading her mother's letter, recognizes old Benjamin as Fritz; \*Lucien learns from Aurore that Jeanne is her sister (and that his mother killed their mother); \*Raoul de la Maurelière realizes that César is the son of Blaisot and that his temptress is the comtesse des Mazures; \*Lucien, after wounding Maurelière in a duel, discovers under his shirt a medallion with the portrait of Gretchen; \*the gypsy girl realizes from a medallion found in Polyte's hand that Aurore is free; \*Bibi recognizes Jeanne and Aurore as being the aristocrats described by the gypsy girl; \*Paul (alias the chevalier des Mazures), having seen the medallion of Gretchen that Bibi shows him (after having received it from the gypsy girl who received it from

Polyte), recognizes that the aristocrat he should be arresting is his daughter Aurore; \*Bibi reveals to Paul that his daughter has been arrested in place of Jeanne; Bibi, who has escaped, learns that the girl saved from the guillotine is Aurore; Bibi discovers that his fellow stagecoach passenger is Dagobert; \*Dagobert learns from Bibi that Aurore and Jeanne are in Paris and that Aurore is in prison; Polyte recognizes Dagobert as the man at the Tuileries who saved his life; \*Dagobert recognizes the gypsy girl who had once foretold his fortune; \*Dagobert's doctor realizes that the German doctor who arrives unexpectedly—sent by the Masques Rouges—is his old master and he recognizes him to be his pupil and Polyte to be the young man whom he had just saved on the road; years later, Polyte recognizes a stranger who comes up to talk to him as Bibi; both recognize the gypsy girl, and Zoe to be her assistant; Benedict comes across and recognizes Bibi; \*Paul (who has been mad for years) regains his sanity and recognizes Benedict and Bibi; the old hermit is recognized as Dom Jérôme; \*the chevalier des Mazures learns from Dom Jérôme that his daughter is alive; \*the gypsy girl discovers that her manservant is none other than Bibi; \*the republican (lured into a trap) realizes that an attractive German lady was the young girl whose parents he had sent to the guillotine (her identity was revealed to the reader two pages earlier); \*the gypsy girl (condemned by the gypsies) recognizes Lucien, Dagobert, Aurore, and Jeanne as those who have trapped and ruined her.

It does not matter whether those who have (fortunately) not read *Le forgeron de la Cour-Dieu* have managed to make head or tail of this torrent of anagnorisis involving characters they know nothing about. It is all the better for them to remain in a state of confusion, since this novel, in comparison to feuilleton classics, is like a film that, to attract a Last Tango in Paris audience, offers its spectators 120 minutes of uninterrupted rear penetration between a hundred patients in a psychiatric hospital. Which is exactly what Sade did in *The 120 Days of Sodom*, pushing down the accelerator pedal for hundreds of pages, whereas Dante limited himself to writing "he kissed my mouth, trembling all over."

Ponson du Terrail's recognitions are pointless, apart from being exaggeratedly redundant, because the reader already knows all about his characters. But for the benefit of readers who are easy to please, a touch of sadism is brought into play. The characters in the novel play the part of village idiots—they are the last to understand what the readers and the other characters in the story have understood perfectly well.

Village-idiot anagnorisis is divided into anagnorisis of real idiots and falsely accused idiots. We have a real idiot when the elements of plot, details, facts, confidential information, and unambiguous signs all point toward the anagnorisis, and the character alone remains ignorant; in other words, the plot has provided both him and the reader with the means of resolving the enigma, and the fact that he has failed to do so is inexplicable. The perfect example of the real idiot, used critically by authors, is the detective story in which the policeman offers a sharp contrast to the detective (who gains knowledge at the same rate that the reader does). But there are cases in which the idiot is falsely accused because the events themselves are of no help to him, and what makes the reader aware of what is happening is popular plot tradition. For example, the reader knows, through narrative tradition, that character X must be the child of character Y. But Y cannot know this, since he has not read serial fiction.

A typical case is that of Rodolphe of Gérolstein in *Les mystères de Paris*. Rodolphe has met La Goualeuse, otherwise known as Fleur-de-Marie, a sweet, defenseless prostitute, and as soon as we are told that his daughter, whom he had had with Sarah McGregor, was taken away from him when she was very young, we immediately guess that Fleur-de-Marie can only be his daughter. But why should Rodolphe imagine he is the father of a young girl he comes across by chance in a sordid tavern? He will find out, quite rightly, only at the end.

But Eugène Sue knows we will already suspect something, and reveals the answer at the end of the first installment: this is a typical case of subjection of the plot to the rules of literary tradition and commercial distribution. Literary tradition ensures that the reader already knows what is the most probable solution, whereas the weekly distribution of the feuilleton, with the story that continues for an endless number of installments, requires that the reader not be kept in suspense for too long, for fear of losing track of the story. Sue is therefore obliged to close that question so that he can open others without overburdening the reader's memory and capacity for suspense.

In narrative terms, he commits one suicide while keeping his best card for the second round. But the suicide occurred as soon as he chose to move according to obvious narrative solutions: the popular novel cannot be complex, not even in the invention of plot.

There is a last device in the category of pointless anagnorisis: the topos of the false stranger. At the beginning of a chapter, the popular novel often introduces a mysterious character who is unfamiliar to the readers. But a little further into the action they are told, "The stranger, whom the reader will have recognized as our X . . ." Here again we have a feeble narrative expedient through which the narrator introduces once again, in a cheap way, the pleasure of revelation. Note here that the anagnorisis is not directed at the character (the stranger knows perfectly well who he is, and generally appears in a dark alleyway, or in a private room, without the others having yet seen him). And if the reader is familiar with feuilletons, he understands straightaway that the stranger is a false stranger and can generally guess immediately who he is. But the author insists, nevertheless, on trying to make him play the role of village idiot—and perhaps with some readers he succeeds.

Although, from the point of view of plot style, these cheap devices constitute narrative padding, from the point of view of psychological enjoyment and success they work wonderfully—the laziness of readers demands that they be blandished with mysteries they have already solved or can solve easily.

Having reached this point, we might indeed ask whether, resorting to such well-worn ploys, the anagnorisis found in the feuilleton still has the narrative power that it once had. Well, yes. A friend of mine used to say, "When I see a flag fluttering in a film, I start to cry, and it doesn't matter whose country it belongs to." Someone wrote, in a review of the film *Love Story*, that you need a heart of stone not to burst out laughing at Oliver and Jenny's situation. Wrong. Even with a heart of stone, there will still be a tear in our eyes—there is a chemistry of passions, and when narrative ploys are designed to make us cry, then they always do make us cry, and the most cynical snob can at most pretend to scratch his nose to dry away a furtive tear. We can watch *Stagecoach* (or even one of its more slapdash remakes) countless times and yet, when the Sixth Cavalry arrives with the sound of the bugle, charging with sabers

drawn to devastate Geronimo's mob on the verge of victory, even the most perverse heart pulses away under a fine lawn shirt.

So let us freely abandon ourselves to the pleasure and excitement of anagnorisis, even if we already know who has to recognize whom, and let us marvel aghast at the many techniques with which this narrative archetype continues to reappear throughout the history of the feuilleton:

"Oh!" said Milady, rising to her feet, "I defy you to find the court which pronounced the infamous sentence against me. I defy you to find he who carried it out." "Silence!" said a voice. "It is for me to reply to that." And the man in the red cloak came forward in his turn. "What man is that? What man is that?" cried Milady, overcome by terror, her hair falling loose and rising above her livid countenance as if it were alive. "Who are you then?" cried all the witnesses of this scene. "Ask that woman," said the man in the red cloak, "for you may plainly see she knows me!" "The executioner of Lille, the executioner of Lille!" cried Milady, a prey to insensate terror, and clinging to the wall to avoid falling. And this man who for thirty years had bowed his head before André, stood up to his full height and, indicating the corpse of the father to the degenerate son, then the doorway and the man who had remained on the threshold, he said: "Monsieur Vicomte, your father murdered your mother's first husband, then cast your elder brother into the sea. But this brother is not dead: here he is."

And he pointed to Armand, while André stepped back, terrified. "Your father," Bastien continued, "repented at the last minute and has restored to your brother the inheritance he had stolen from him and had sought to leave to you. This is no longer your house, but that of Comte Armand de Kergaz." "Begone!" Armand had spoken as master and André, perhaps for the first time in his life, obeyed. He moved slowly like a wounded tiger that retires backward and, as it retires, still menaces. Having reached the doorway, glancing back toward the window from where he had watched Paris illuminated by the first rays of dawn, almost as if to hurl at Armand a terrible and supreme challenge, he exclaimed: "So alas for both of us, virtuous brother! We shall see who will be the winner: you the philanthropist, I the bandit, you the heavens, I the underworld . . .

Paris shall be our battle ground." He left with his head high and an infernal smile on his face and, without shedding a tear, left the house no longer his, like a godless Don Giovanni. He stopped once again and allowed his gaze to wander over those present. The guests listened in silence and their smiles disappeared from their faces. "Well," he continued, "this thief, this murderer, this torturer of women . . .

I found him this evening, an hour ago . . . he is here among us: here he is!" And with his hand outstretched, he pointed to the viscount. While the viscount leapt onto his seat, the speaker's mask fell off. "Armand, the sculptor!" someone said. "André!" exclaimed Armand in a thunderous voice. "André, you recognize me?" But at that moment, while the guests sat motionless listening to the abrupt and terrible conclusion to the story, the door opened and a man appeared, dressed in black. Like the old servant who went to surprise Don Giovanni during an orgy to announce his father's death, this man, without any concern for the guests, went straight up to André, saying, "The general, Count Felipone, your father, who has been ill for some time, is sick and wishes to see you on his deathbed."

But the man who had brought the news, catching sight of Armand, who had rushed up from behind André to stop him, shouted, "Good heavens, the

living image of my colonel!" A man appeared at the doorway of the room where the married couple were to be found. At the sight of him, Count Felipone drew back horrified. The new arrival was a man of around thirty-six, tall in stature and dressed in a long blue uniform decorated with a red stripe, of the kind worn by imperial soldiers during the time of the Restoration. His eyes shone with a dark light that gave his face, pale with anger, an expression of disdain. He took three steps toward Felipone, who stepped back in fear, pointed an accusing finger at him, and said, "Murderer! Murderer!" "Bastien!" murmured Felipone, aghast. "Yes," replied the hussar.

"Yes, I am Bastien, whom you thought you had killed, but who is not dead . . . Bastien, who an hour later was found by the Cossacks drenched in blood; Bastien, who after forty years in prison has come to seek amends for the blood of his colonel with which you stained your hands." While Felipone, dumbfounded, continued to move back at that terrible sight, Bastien turned to the countess, saying, "Madame, this man, this wretch, is the murderer of your son just as he was the murderer of his father." The countess, who one instant earlier had been helpless and mad with grief, threw herself like a tiger upon the killer of her son to rip him to pieces with her claws. "Murderer! Murderer!" she shouted. "The gallows await you . . .

I myself shall deliver you to the executioner!" But at that very moment, as the villain continued to retreat, the mother felt something moving within her. She let out a cry and stopped, pallid, reeling, broken-hearted . . . The man she wanted to consign to justice for its vengeance, the man she wanted to drag to the gallows, this wretched vile man was the father of her other child, who was beginning to move about within her. "It is she! It is she!" exclaimed the old man, turning his gaze from Marzia to Virginia. He alone had correctly interpreted the sad cry of the woman who had fainted—and she fell into her habitual stupor, then gradually reviving, as if she had an important confession to make—and a tear finally bathed that cheek that had been dry for so long, through time and suffering. Old Elias, who for some time had been beside himself with consternation, took advantage of an instant in which the women raised the countess's head to help her drink, to hold before her a gold necklace, with a beautiful cross in the same metal, encrusted with costliest diamonds of dazzling splendor.

In doing so, the old man added the following names: "Virginia and Silvia!" "Silvia!" exclaimed the countess, and her glassy eyes stared at the precious jewelry as if it were a talisman, and her fine head fell back upon the pillow, like a flower in the blazing desert wind that drops upon its stem, never to straighten again. But the final hour of that beautiful victim of betrayal had not yet struck. She stirred a moment later, as if touched by an electric current, opened her eyes, and turned to Marzia with such an ardent expression of love that only a mother can understand and cherish. "My daughter!" she exclaimed, and fell back again. At that very moment, a man with a bandaged face hurried precipitously into the room, kneeled between the two beds of the wounded women, and cried desperately, "Forgive me! Forgive me!" Countess Virginia was electrified by that cry. She sat up with extraordinary speed and glancing down upon the prostrate wretch, exclaimed in a heart-rending voice, "Marzia! Marzia! That villain is your father!" Étienne drew his wallet from his pocket, took from it a letter sealed with a large black seal, and gave it to Georges, adding: "My dear son, read this letter . . .

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Read it aloud . . . and you, Lucie Fortier, listen . . ." Georges Darier took the letter with trembling hand. He seemed not to have the courage to break the seal. "Read!" repeated the artist. The young man ripped open the envelope and read, "My beloved Georges. In the month of September 1861, a poor woman, with a child in her arms, presented herself at my house at Chevry. That poor woman had been persecuted, spied upon, victim of the triple accusation of murder, theft, and arson. Her name was Jeanne Fortier . . ." These words were followed by a triple exclamation made simultaneously by Georges, Lucie, and Lucien Labroue. "I . . . I . . . ," said Georges, confused. "I am the son of Jeanne Fortier, and Lucie . . . Lucie . . . is my sister!" At the same time he held his arms out to the young girl. "My brother! . . . My brother! . . . ," exclaimed Lucie, throwing herself toward Georges, who held her in a tight embrace. "Yes . . . yes . . . ," he then exclaimed. "This is the proof of the crime! Oh! Mother! . . . Mother! God has finally then been moved to pity! But this final proof, which was thought to have been lost . . . where was it?" "In the side of the small papier-mâché horse you were carrying when you and your mother arrived at Chevry," replied Étienne Castel.

"Can you prove it?" "This is her death certificate . . . the real Paul Harmant, the millionaire, the great industrialist, former associate of James Mortimer, is none other than Jacques Garaud!" Marius abruptly drew his chair closer to Thénardier's, who noted this movement and continued with the deliberation of an orator who holds his interlocutor and feels his adversary palpitating under his words: "This man, forced to conceal himself for reasons, moreover, which are foreign to politics, had adopted the sewer as his domicile and had a key to it. It was, I repeat, the sixth of June, toward eight in the evening. Do you understand now: the person who carried the corpse was Jean Valjean, the one who had the key is speaking to you at this moment; and the piece of the coat . . ." Thénardier completed the phrase by drawing from his pocket at eye level, nipped between his two thumbs and his two forefingers, a strip of torn black cloth, covered with dark spots.

Marius had sprung to his feet, pale, hardly able to draw his breath, with his eyes riveted on the fragment of black cloth, and without uttering a word, without taking his eyes from that fragment, he retreated and fumbled with his right hand along the wall for a key that was in the lock of a cupboard near the chimney. He found the key, opened the cupboard, and plunged his arm into it without looking, and without his frightened gaze quitting the rag, which Thénardier still held outspread. But the other continued. "Monsieur le Baron, I have the strongest of reasons for believing that the assassinated young man was an opulent stranger lured into a trap by Jean Valjean, and the bearer of an enormous sum of money." "The young man was myself, and here is the coat!" cried Marius, and he flung upon the floor an old black coat all covered with blood. Then, snatching the fragment from the hands of Thénardier, he crouched down over the coat, and laid the torn piece against the tattered skirt. It fitted exactly, and the strip completed the coat.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Villefort, stepping back fearfully. "Surely that is not the voice of Abbé Busoni." "No!" The abbé threw off the false tonsure, shook his head, and his hair, no longer confined, fell in black masses around his manly face. "It is the face of the Count of Monte Cristo!" cried Villefort, with a haggard expression. "You are not exactly right, Monsieur Procureur; you must go farther back." "That voice, that voice!—where did I first hear it?" "You heard it for the first time at Marseille, twenty-three years ago, the day of your marriage with Mademoiselle de Saint-Méran. Refer to your papers." "You are not Busoni?—"

you are not Monte Cristo? Oh, heavens—you are then some secret, implacable, and mortal enemy!

I must have wronged you in some way at Marseille. Oh, woe to me!" "Yes; you are right," said the count, crossing his arms over his broad chest; "search, search." "But what have I done to you?" exclaimed Villefort, whose mind was balancing between reason and insanity, in the cloud that is neither a dream nor reality; "what have I done to you? Tell me, then! Speak!" "You condemned me to a horrible, slow death; you killed my father; you deprived me of liberty, of love, and happiness." "Who are you, then? Who are you? Good Lord!" "I am the specter of a wretch you buried in the dungeons of the Chateau d'If.

When he at length issued from his tomb, heaven gave him the mask of the Count of Monte Cristo, enriched him with gold and diamonds, and led him to you." "Ah, I recognize you, I recognize you!" exclaimed the king's attorney. "You are . . ." "I am Edmond Dantès!" The Count of Monte Cristo turned dreadfully pale; his eye seemed to burn with a devouring fire. He bounded toward a dressing room near his bedroom and in a trice, tearing off his cravat, his coat, and waistcoat, he put on a sailor's jacket and hat beneath which rolled his long black hair. He returned thus, formidable and implacable, advancing with his arms crossed on his breast, toward the general who was waiting for him, and who, feeling his teeth chatter and his legs sink beneath him, drew back a step, and only stopped when he found a table to support his clenched hand. "Fernand," cried he, "of my hundred names I need only tell you one to overwhelm you! But you guess it now, do you not?"

The general, with his head thrown back, hands extended, gaze fixed, looked silently at this dreadful apparition; then seeking the wall to support him, he glided along close to it until he reached the door, through which he went out backward, uttering this single mournful, lamentable, distressing cry—"Edmond Dantès!" Then, with sighs that were hardly human, he dragged himself as far as the porchway of the house, across the courtyard like a drunken man, and fell into the arms of his manservant. "Do you repent?" asked a deep, solemn voice, which caused Danglars's hair to stand on end. His feeble eyes endeavored to distinguish objects, and behind the bandit he saw a man wrapped in a cloak, half hidden by the shadow of a stone column. "Of what must I repent?" stammered Danglars. "Of the evil you have done," said the voice.

"Oh, yes; I repent, I repent!" exclaimed Danglars. And he struck his breast with his emaciated fist. "Then I forgive you," said the man, dropping his cloak and advancing to the light. "The Count of Monte Cristo!" said Danglars, more pale from terror than he had been just before from hunger and misery. "You are mistaken: I am not the Count of Monte Cristo." "Then who are you?" "I am he whom you sold, betrayed, dishonored; I am he upon whom you trampled that you might raise yourself to fortune; I am he whose father you condemned to die of hunger; I am he whom you also condemned to starvation; and who yet forgives you, because he too hopes to be forgiven: I am Edmond Dantès!" Then he burst into a frightening laugh and began to dance before the body. He had gone mad.<sup>1</sup>

Oh, the delights of anagnorisis and the false stranger! Nor have they been rejected by Achille Campanile, who employed them, though with surreal good sense, at the beginning of his novel *Se la luna mi porta fortuna* (1928):

Anyone, on that gray morning of the 16 December 19- . . . , furtively entering, and at their own risk and peril, the bedroom where the opening



scene of our story takes place, would have been exceedingly surprised to find a young man with curly hair and pale cheeks, pacing nervously backward and forward; a young man whom no one would have recognized as Doctor Falcuccio, first of all because he was not Doctor Falcuccio, and, in the second place, because he bore not the slightest resemblance to Doctor Falcuccio. We observe, in passing, that the surprise of anyone furtively entering that room to which we refer is wholly unjustified. That man was in his own home and had every right to pace about in whatever way he pleased. (From *Opere: Romanzi e racconti*, 1924-1933)

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The end