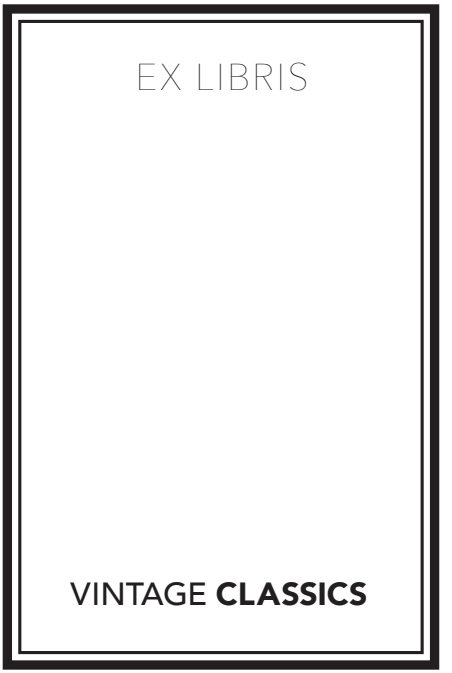
ITALO
CALVINO

Last Comes the Raven



ITALO CALVINO

Italo Calvino was born in Cuba in 1923 and grew up in Italy. He was an essayist and journalist and a member of the editorial staff of Einaudi in Turin. His other books include *If on a winter's night a traveller*, *Invisible Cities* and *Our Ancestors*. In 1981 he won the prestigious Premio Feltrinelli. He died in 1985.

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ITALO CALVINO

Last Comes the Raven

And Other Stories

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY
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Ann Goldstein, Ben Johnson,
William Weaver

VINTAGE

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Vintage Classics is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

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This edition published in Vintage Classics in 2023
First published in Italy by Arnoldo Mondadori Editore S.p.A.
as *Ultimo viene il corvo*

penguin.co.uk/vintage-classics

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781784878214

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Contents

Editor's Note

All translations by Archibald Colquhoun and Peggy Wright were previously published in the collection *Adam, One Afternoon and Other Stories* (London: Collins, 1957; London: Secker & Warburg, 1983). The story 'Dollars and Old Whores' was previously titled 'Dollars and the Demimondaine'.

Last Comes the Raven

And Other Stories

Adam, One Afternoon

The new gardener's boy had long hair kept in place by a piece of cloth tied around his head with a little bow. He was walking along the path with his watering can filled to the brim and his other arm stretched out to balance the load. Slowly, carefully, he watered the nasturtiums as if pouring out coffee and milk, until the earth at the foot of each plant dissolved into a soft black patch; when it was large and moist enough he lifted the watering can and passed on to the next plant. Maria-nunziata was watching him from the kitchen window and thinking what a nice calm job gardening must be. He was a young man, she noticed, though he still wore shorts and that long hair made him look like a girl. She stopped washing the dishes and tapped on the window.

"Hey, boy," she called.

The gardener's boy raised his head, saw Maria-nunziata, and smiled. She laughed back at him, partly because she had never seen a boy with such long hair and a bow like that on his head. The gardener's boy beckoned to her with one hand, and Maria-nunziata went on laughing at the funny gesture he'd made, and began

gesturing back to explain that she had the dishes to wash. But the boy beckoned again, and pointed at the pots of dahlias with his other hand. Why was he pointing at those dahlias? Maria-nunziata opened the window and stuck her head out.

"What's up?" she asked, and began laughing again.

"D'you want to see something nice?"

"What's that?"

"Something nice. Come and see. Quickly."

"Tell me what."

"I'll give it to you. I'll give you something very nice."

"But I've got the dishes to wash, and the signora'll come along and not find me."

"Do you want it or don't you? Come on, now."

"Wait a second," said Maria-nunziata, and shut the window.

When she came out through the kitchen door the gardener's boy was still there, watering the nasturtiums.

"Hello," said Maria-nunziata.

Maria-nunziata seemed taller than she was because of her high-heeled shoes, which were awful to work in, but she loved wearing them. Her little face looked like a child's amid its mass of black curls, and her legs were thin and childlike, too, though her body, under the folds of her apron, was already round and ripe. She was always laughing, either at what others or she herself said.

"Hello," said the gardener's boy. The skin on his face, neck, and chest was dark brown, perhaps because he was always half naked, as now.

"What's your name?" asked Maria-nunziata.

"Libereso," said the gardener's boy.

Maria-nunziata laughed and repeated, "Libereso . . . Libereso . . . What a funny name, Libereso."

"It's a name in Esperanto," he said. "In Esperanto it means 'liberty.'"

"Esperanto," said Maria-nunziata. "Are you Esperanto?"

"Esperanto's a language," explained Libereso. "My father speaks Esperanto."

"I'm Calabrian," exclaimed Maria-nunziata.

"What's your name?"

"Maria-nunziata," she said, and laughed.

"Why are you always laughing?"

"Why are you called Esperanto?"

"Not Esperanto, Libereso."

"Why?"

"Why are you called Maria-nunziata?"

"It is the Madonna's name. I'm named after the Madonna, and my brother after Saint Joseph."

"Senjosef?"

Maria-nunziata burst out laughing. "Senjosef! Saint Joseph, not Senjosef, Libereso!"

"My brother," said Libereso, "is named Germinal and my sister Omnia."

"That nice thing you mentioned," said Maria-nunziata. "Show it to me."

"Come on, then," said Libereso. He put down the watering can and took her by the hand.

Maria-nunziata hesitated. "Tell me what it is first."

"You'll see," he said, "but you must promise me to take care of it."

"Will you give it to me?"

"Yes, I'll give it to you." He had led her to a corner of the garden wall. There the dahlias standing in pots were as tall as the two of them.

"It's there."

"What is?"

"Wait."

Maria-nunziata peeped over his shoulder. Libereso bent down to move a pot, lifted another by the wall, and pointed to the ground.

"There," he said.

"What is it?" asked Maria-nunziata. She could not see anything; the corner was in shadow, full of wet leaves and garden mold.

"Look, it's moving," said the boy. Then she saw something that looked like a moving stone or leaf, something wet, with eyes and feet: a toad.

"Mamma mia!"

Maria-nunziata went skipping away among the dahlias in her high-heeled shoes. Libereso squatted down by the toad and laughed, showing the white teeth in the middle of his brown face.

"Are you frightened? It's only a toad! Why are you frightened?"

"A toad!" gasped Maria-nunziata.

"Of course it's a toad. Come here," said Libereso.

She pointed at it with a trembling finger. "Kill it."

He put out his hands, as if to protect it. "I don't want to. It's so nice."

"A nice toad?"

"All toads are nice. They eat the worms."

"Oh!" said Maria-nunziata, but she did not come any nearer. She was chewing the edge of her apron and trying to watch out of the corners of her eyes.

"Look how pretty it is," said Libereso, and put a hand on it.

Maria-nunziata approached, no longer laughing, and looked on, openmouthed. "No! No! Don't touch it!"

With one finger Libereso was stroking the toad's gray-green back, which was covered with slimy warts.

"Are you mad? Don't you know they burn when you touch them, and make your hand swell up?"

The boy showed her his big brown hands, the palms covered with a layer of yellow calluses.

"Oh, it won't hurt me," he said. "And it's so pretty."

Now he'd taken the toad by the scruff of the neck like

a cat and put it in the palm of his hand. Maria-nunziata, still chewing the edge of her apron, came nearer and crouched down beside him.

"*Mamma mia!*" she exclaimed.

They were both crouching down behind the dahlias, and Maria-nunziata's rosy knees were grazing the brown, scratched ones of Libereso. Libereso cupped his other hand over the back of the toad and caught it every now and again as it tried to slip out.

"You stroke it, Maria-nunziata," he said.

The girl hid her hands in her apron. "No," she said firmly.

"What?" he said. "You don't want it?"

Maria-nunziata lowered her eyes, glanced at the toad, and lowered them again quickly. "No," she said.

"But it's yours. I'm giving it to you."

Maria-nunziata's eyes clouded over. It was sad to refuse a present—no one ever gave her presents—but the toad really did revolt her.

"You can take it home if you like. It'll keep you company."

"No," she said.

Libereso put the toad back on the ground, and it quickly hopped away and squatted under the leaves.

"Good-bye, Libereso."

"Wait a minute."

"But I must go and finish washing the dishes. The signora doesn't like me to come out in the garden."

"Wait. I want to give you something. Something really nice. Come with me."

She began following him along the gravel paths. What a strange boy this Libereso was, with that long hair, and picking up toads in his hands.

"How old are you, Libereso?"

"Fifteen. And you?"

"Fourteen."

"Now, or on your next birthday?"

"On my next birthday. Feast of the Annunciation."

"Has that passed yet?"

"What, don't you know when the Feast of the Annunciation is?" She began laughing.

"No."

"The Feast of the Annunciation, when there's the procession. Don't you go to the procession?"

"Me? No."

"Back home there are lovely processions. It's not like here, back home. There are big fields full of bergamots, nothing but bergamots, and everyone picks bergamots from morning till night. I've got fourteen brothers and sisters and they all pick bergamots; five died when they were babies, and then my mother got tetanus, and we were in a train for a week to go to Uncle Carmelo's, and eight of us all slept in a garage there. Tell me, why do you have such long hair?"

They had stopped.

"Because it grows like that. You've got long hair, too."

"I'm a girl. If you wear long hair, you're like a girl."

"I'm not like a girl. You don't tell a boy from a girl by the hair."

"Not by the hair?"

"No, not by the hair."

"Why not by the hair?"

"Would you like me to give you something nice?"

"Oh, yes."

Libereso began moving among the arum lilies, budding white trumpets silhouetted against the sky. Libereso looked into each, groped around with two fingers, and then hid something in his fist. Maria-nunziata had not gone into the flower bed, and was watching him with silent laughter. What was he up to now? When Libereso had looked into all the lilies, he came up to her, holding one hand over the other.

"Open your hands," he said.

Maria-nunziata cupped her hands but was afraid to put them under his. "What have you got in there?"

"Something very nice. You'll see."

"Show me first."

Libereso opened his hands and let her look inside. His palm was full of multicolored rose chafers, red and black and even purple ones, but the green were the prettiest. They were buzzing and slithering over one another and waving little black legs in the air. Maria-nunziata hid her hands under her apron.

"Here," said Libereso. "Don't you like them?"

"Yes," said Maria-nunziata uncertainly, still keeping her hands under her apron.

"When you hold them tight they tickle. Would you like to feel?"

Maria-nunziata held out her hands timidly, and Libereso poured a cascade of rose chafers of every color into them.

"Don't be frightened; they won't bite you."

"*Mamma mia!*" It hadn't occurred to her that they might bite her. She opened her hands and the rose chafers spread their wings and the beautiful colors vanished and there was nothing to be seen but a swarm of black insects flying about and settling.

"What a pity. I try to give you a present and you don't want it."

"I must go wash the dishes. The signora will be cross if she can't find me."

"Don't you want a present?"

"What are you going to give me now?"

"Come and see."

He took her hand again and led her through the flower beds.

"I must get back to the kitchen soon, Libereso. There's a chicken to pluck, too."

"Pooh!"

"Why pooh?"

"We don't eat the flesh of dead birds or animals."

"Why, are you always in Lent?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what do you eat, then?"

"Oh, all sorts of things—artichokes, lettuce, tomatoes. My father doesn't like us to eat the flesh of dead animals. Or coffee or sugar either."

"What d'you do with your sugar ration then?"

"Sell it on the black market."

They had reached some climbing plants, starred all over with red flowers.

"What lovely flowers," said Maria-nunziata. "D'you ever pick them?"

"What for?"

"To take to the Madonna. Flowers are for the Madonna."

"*Mesembryanthemum.*"

"What's that?"

"This plant's called *Mesembryanthemum* in Latin. All flowers have Latin names."

"The Mass is in Latin, too."

"I wouldn't know about that."

Libereso was now peering closely between the winding branches on the wall.

"There it is," he said.

"What is?"

It was a lizard, green with black markings, basking in the sun.

"I'll catch it."

"No."

But he inched toward the lizard, very slowly, with both hands open; a jump, and he'd caught it. He laughed happily, showing his white teeth. "Look out, it's escaping!" First a stunned-looking head, then a tail slithered

out between his closed fingers. Maria-nunziata was laughing, too, but every time she saw the lizard she skipped back and pulled her skirt tight about her knees.

"So you really don't want me to give you anything at all?" said Libereso rather sadly, and very carefully he put the lizard back on the wall; off it shot. Maria-nunziata kept her eyes lowered.

"Come on," said Libereso, and took her hand again.

"I'd like to have a lipstick and paint my lips red on Sundays to go out dancing. And a black veil to put on my head afterward for benediction."

"On Sundays," said Libereso, "I go out to the woods with my brother, and we fill two sacks with pinecones. Then, in the evening, my father reads out loud from Kropotkin. My father has hair down to his shoulders and a beard right down to his chest. And he wears shorts in summer and winter. And I do drawings for the Anarchist Federation windows. The figures in top hats are businessmen, those in caps are generals, and those in round hats are priests. Then I paint them in watercolors."

They came to a pond with round water-lily leaves floating on it.

"Quiet, now," commanded Libereso.

Under the water a frog could be seen swimming up with sharp little strokes of its green legs. It suddenly surfaced, jumped onto a water-lily leaf, and sat down in the middle.

"There," cried Libereso, and put out a hand to catch it, but Maria-nunziata let out a cry—"Ugh!"—and the frog jumped back into the water. Libereso began searching for it, his nose almost touching the surface.

"There it is." He thrust in a hand and pulled it out in his closed fist. "Two of them together," he cried. "Look. Two of them, on top of each other."

"Why?" asked Maria-nunziata.

"Male and female stuck together," said Libereso.

"Look what they're doing." And he tried to put the frogs in Maria-nunziata's hand. Maria-nunziata wasn't sure whether she was frightened because they were frogs or because they were male and female stuck together.

"Leave them alone," she said. "You mustn't touch them."

"Male and female," repeated Libereso. "They're making tadpoles."

A cloud passed over the sun. Suddenly Maria-nunziata began to feel anxious.

"It's late. The signora must be looking for me."

But she did not go. Instead they went on wandering around, though the sun did not come out again. And then he found a snake, a tiny little snake, behind a hedge of bamboo. Libereso wound it around his arm and stroked its head.

"Once I used to train snakes. I had a dozen of them; one was long and yellow, a water snake, but it shed its skin and escaped. Look at this one opening its mouth; look how its tongue is forked. Stroke it—it won't bite."

But Maria-nunziata was frightened of snakes, too.

Then they went to the rock pool. First he showed her the fountains and opened all the jets, which pleased her very much. Then he showed her the goldfish. It was a lonely old goldfish, and its scales were already whitening. At last: Maria-nunziata liked the goldfish. Libereso began to move his hands around in the water to catch it; it was very difficult, but when he'd caught it Maria-nunziata could put it in a bowl and keep it in the kitchen. He managed to catch it, but didn't take it out of the water in case it suffocated.

"Put your hands down here; stroke it," said Libereso. "You can feel it breathing. It has fins like paper and scales that prickle. Not much, though."

But Maria-nunziata did not want to stroke the fish either.

In the petunia bed the earth was very soft, and Libereso dug about with his fingers and pulled out some long, soft worms.

But Maria-nunziata ran away with little shrieks.

"Put your hand here," said Libereso, pointing to the trunk of an old peach tree. Maria-nunziata did not understand why, but she put her hand there; then she screamed and ran to dip it in the pool. For when she had pulled her hand away it was covered with ants. The peach tree was a mass of them, tiny black Argentine ants.

"Look," said Libereso, and put a hand on the trunk. The ants could be seen crawling over his hand, but he didn't brush them off.

"Why?" asked Maria-nunziata. "Why are you letting yourself get covered with ants?"

His hand was now quite black, and they were crawling up his wrist.

"Take your hand away," moaned Maria-nunziata. "You'll get them all over you."

The ants were crawling up his naked arm and had already reached his elbow.

Now his whole arm was covered with a veil of moving black dots; they reached his armpit, but he did not brush them off.

"Get rid of them, Libereso. Put your arm in water!"

Libereso laughed, while some ants now even crawled from his neck onto his face.

"Libereso! I'll do whatever you like! I'll accept all those presents you gave me." She threw her arms around his neck and started to brush off the ants.

Smiling his brown-and-white smile, Libereso took his hand away from the tree and began nonchalantly dusting his arm. But he was obviously touched.

"Very well, then, I'll give you a really big present, I've decided. The biggest present I can."

"What's that?"

"A hedgehog."

"*Mamma mia!* The signora! The signora's calling me!"

Maria-nunziata had just finished washing the dishes when she heard a pebble beat against the window. Underneath stood Libereso with a large basket.

"Maria-nunziata, let me in. I want to give you a surprise."

"No, you can't come up. What have you got there?"

But at that moment the signora rang the bell, and Maria-nunziata vanished.

When she returned to the kitchen, Libereso was no longer to be seen. Neither inside the kitchen nor underneath the window. Maria-nunziata went up to the sink. Then she saw the surprise.

On every plate she had left to dry there was a crouching frog, a snake was coiled up inside a saucepan, there was a soup bowl full of lizards, and slimy snails were making iridescent streaks all over the glasses. In the basin full of water swam the lonely old goldfish.

Maria-nunziata stepped back, but between her feet she saw a great big toad. And behind it were five little toads in a line, taking little hops toward her across the black-and-white-tiled floor.