



‘A LIVELLA

THE LEVEL¹



Ogn’anno, il due novembre, c’è usanza
per i defunti andare al Cimitero.
Ognuno ll’adda fà chesta crianza,
ognuno adda tené chistu penziero.

Every year, on the 2nd of November², we are
accustomed
On All Soul’s Day to go to the cemetery.
Everyone must do this kindness,
everyone should be so thoughtful.

Ogn’anno, puntualmente, in questo giorno
di questa triste e mesta ricorrenza,
anch’io ci vado, e con dei fiori adorno
il loculo marmoreo ‘e zi’ Vicenza.

Every year, exactly on this day
of this sad and woeful celebration,
I go there too, and adorn with flowers
the marble niche of aunt Vicenza.

St’anno m’è capitato ‘navventura...
dopo di aver compiuto il triste omaggio,
Madonna! si ce penzo, e che paura!
ma po’ facette un’anema e curaggio.

This year I had a misadventure ...
after paying the grievous homage,
Virgin Mary! thinking about it, what a scare!
but then I took heart and courage.

‘O fatto è chisto, statemi a sentire:
s’avvicinava ll’ora d’ à chiusura
io, tomo tomo, stavo per uscire
buttando un occhio a qualche sepoltura.

The fact is this, listen to me:
it was nearing closing time
and bit by bit, I was going to leave
casting glances at the graves.

“Qui dorme in pace il nobile marchese
signore di Rovigo e di Belluno
ardimentoso eroe di mille imprese
morto l’11 maggio del ’31”

“Here lies in peace the noble Marquis
lord of Rovigo and of Belluno
courageous hero of a thousand feats
died on May 11 of ‘31 ”³

‘O stemma cu ‘a curona ‘ncoppa a tutto...

The coat of arms topped by a crown ...

...sotto 'na croce fatta 'e lampadine,
tre mazze 'e rose cu 'na lista 'e lutto,
cannele, cannelotte e sei lumine.

Proprio azzecata 'a tomba 'e stu signore
nce stava 'n 'ata tomba piccerella,
abbandunata, senza manco un fiore,
pe' segno, sulamente 'na crucella.

E ncoppa 'a croce appena se liggeva:
"Esposito Gennaro – netturbino",
guardannola, che ppena me faceva
stu muorto senza manco nu lumino!

Questa è la vita! 'ncapo a me pensavo...
chi ha avuto tanto e chi nun ave niente!
Stu povero maronna s'aspettava
ca pur all'atu munno era pezzente?

Mentre fantasticavo stu pensiero,
s'era ggià fatta quase mezzanotte,
e i'rimanette 'nchiuso priggioniero,
muorto 'e paura...nnanze 'e cannelotte.

Tutto a 'nu tratto, che veco 'a luntano?
Ddoje ombre avvicinarsi 'a parte mia...
Penzaje:stu fatto a me mme pare strano...
Stongo scetato...dormo, o è fantasia?

Ate che fantasia;era 'o Marchese:
c'o' tubbo,'a caramella e c'o' pastrano,
chill'ato apriesso a isso un brutto arnese;
tutto fetente e cu 'nascopa mmano.

E chillo certamente è don Gennaro...
'omuorto pueriello... 'o scupatore.
'Int 'a stu fatto i' nun ce veco chiaro:
so' muorte e se ritirano a chest'ora?

Putevano sta' 'a me quase 'nu palmo,
quanno 'o Marchese se fermaje 'e botto,
s'avota e tomo tomo..calmo calmo,
dicette a don Gennaro:"Giovanotto!

...below a cross made of light bulbs,
three bunches of roses with a mourning list,
tapers, candles and six grave-lights.

Right next to the tomb of this gentleman
there was another tomb, tiny,
abandoned, without even a flower,
as a sign only a tiny cross.

And on the cross barely read:
"Gennaro Esposito⁴ – garbage man",
looking at it, I felt sorrow for
this dead without even a little flame!⁵

This is life! and in my head I thought ...
who had much and who has nothing!
Poor christian⁶, could he have imagined
to be so wretched even in the otherworld?

Lost in reveries over this thought,
it got to be almost midnight,
and I found myself locked in⁷, prisoner,
scared to death... among the candles.

All of a sudden, whom do I see from afar?
Two shadows approaching on my side ...
I thought: This is weird ...
Am I awake... sleeping, or is it an illusion?

It was no dream! There was the Marquis
with topper, monocle and overcoat,
and the one behind him, an ugly creature,
all stinky and with a broom in hand.

And that certainly is Don Gennaro ...
the poor dead man... the street sweeper.
I don't understand this clearly:
do the dead retire at this hour?

So near I could've touch them with my hand,
the Marquis stopped dead,
turns, indifferent, poised and dignified,
addressing Don Gennaro: "Lad!

Da Voi vorrei saper, vile carogna,
con quale ardire e come avete osato
di farvi seppellir, per mia vergogna,
accanto a me che sono blasonato!

La casta è casta e va, sì, rispettata,
ma Voi perdeste il senso e la misura;
la Vostra salma andava, sì, inumata,
ma seppellita nella spazzatura!

Ancora oltre sopportar non posso
la Vostra vicinanza puzzolente,
fa d'uopo, quindi, che cerchiate un fosso
tra i vostri pari, tra la vostra gente”

“Signor Marchese, nun è colpa mia,
i' nun v'avesse fatto chistu tuorto,
mia moglie è stata a ffa' sta fesseria,
i' che putevo fa' si ero muorto?

Si fosse vivo ve farrei cuntento,
pigliasse 'a casciolella cu 'e quatt'osse
e proprio mo, obbj' ... 'nd'a stu mumento
mme ne trasesse dintò a n'ata fossa”.

“E cosa aspetti, oh turpe malcreato,
che l'ira mia raggiunga l'eccedenza?
Se io non fossi stato un titolato
avrei già dato piglio alla violenza!”

“Famme vedé..-piglia sta violenza...
'A verità, Marché, mme so' scucciato
'e te senti; e si perdo 'a pacienza,
mme scordo ca so' muorto e so mazzate!..

Ma chi te cride d'essere...nu ddio?
Ccà dintò, 'o vvuo capi, ca simmo eguale?...
...Muorto si'tu e muorto so' pur'io;
ognuno comme a 'na'ato é tale e quale”.

“Lurido porco!... Come ti permetti
paragonarti a me ch'ebbi natali
illustri, nobilissimi e perfetti,
da fare invidia a Principi Reali?”.

Pray tell, You vile canaille,
with what audacity did You dare
let Yourself be buried, to my shame,
next to a nobleman like me!

Caste is caste, and must be respected,
But You lost all sense and moderation;
Your body had to be inhumed, yes,
but buried in the trash!

I cannot bear further
Your stinking presence,
thus, it's necessary that You look for a ditch
among your peers, among your people”.

“Sir Marquis, it is not my fault,
I wouldn't have done you this affront,
it was my wife's fault,
what was I to do if I was dead?

If I were living I would please you,
I'd take this coffin with my four bones
and right now, really, this very moment
I would move into another grave.”

“And what are you waiting for, you vile and
filthy scoundrel,
that my wrath boils over?
If I had not been titled
I would have resorted to violence already! “

“Let me see ... what violence ...
In truth, Marquis, I'm fed up
listening to you, and if I lose my patience,
I forget that I'm dead and knock you over!..

Who do you think you are ... a god?
In here, put it in your head, we're all equal...
dead are you, and dead I'm too;
each one is the same as the other”.

“You filthy swine! ... How do you dare
compare yourself to me of so
illustrious and noble birth and perfect natal⁸
envy of Royal Princes?”.

“Tu qua’ Natale...Pasca e Ppifania!!!
T”o vvuo’ mettere ‘ncapo...’int’a cervella
che staje malato ancora e’ fantasia?...
‘A morte ‘o ssaje ched”e?...è una livella.

‘Nu rre,’nu magistrato,’nu grand’ommo,
trasenzo stu canciello ha fatt’o punto
c’ha perzo tutto,’a vita e pure ‘o nomme:
tu nu t’hè fatto ancora chistu cunto?

Perciò, stamme a ssenti...nun fa”o restivo,
suppuorteme vicino-che te ‘mporta?
Sti ppagliacciate ‘e ffanno sulo ‘e vive:
nuje simmo serie, appartenimmo à morte!

“But what Christmas⁷...Easter and Epiphany!
do you want to get it into your skull... into
your brain
that you suffer from delusions? ...
Do you know what death is? ... it’s a level.

A king, a magistrate, a great man,
crossing this gate, must reckon that he
has lost everything, his life and his name too:
Haven’t you figure it out yet?

So, listen to me ... don’t be stubborn,
Put up with me close by - what do you care?
These antics are done by the living only;
Here we are serious ... we belong to death! “



Written by: Antonio De Curtis aka **Totò**

Prince **Antonio De Curtis**, best known by his stage name **Totò**, was born in a poor district of Naples on February 15 1898 and died on April 15 1967. Although he received the title of the “Prince of Laughter”, he was born a real prince, albeit impecunious, with the titles and names of *Antonio Griffo Focas Flavio Ducas Commeno Porfirogenito Gagliardi De Curtis di Bisanzio, altezza imperiale, conte palatino, cavaliere del Sacro Romano Impero, esarca di Ravenna, duca di Macedonia e di Illiria, principe di Costantinopoli, di Cilicia, di Tessaglia, di Ponte di Moldavia, di Dardania, del Peloponneso, conte di Cipro e di Epiro, conte e duca di Drivasto e Durazzo.*

Translated by: Fabrizio Medosi, November 16, 2012

Notes

1– The level or, more precisely, the spirit level, is an instrument used by masons, carpenters and bricklayers to plumb surfaces either horizontally or vertically.

2 – In Italy, the “All Souls’ Day” is celebrated on November 2nd.

3 – The author is reading the epitaph on a tombstone.

4– Gennaro Esposito are respectively very common name and surname of the Neapolitan lower class. Esposito (L. *exposito*, meaning exposed, placed outside) was a surname given to babies left in a special cabinet with a revolving door at the *Ospizio degli Esposti* (Orphanage of the Exposed). See picture below.

5– In Naples the cult of the dead is still observed and most graves have perennial grave-lights by an annual subscription.

6 –“Christian” is a poor substitute for the Neapolitan *maronna*, in Italian “Madonna”, meaning the Blessed Virgin, used here to describe a suffering individual, even if male. Literally untranslatable, the religious reference is replaced with the male “Christian”. In Italy a *cristiano* was any man but the Muslim Moor, and was often uttered in conjunction with “poor” as in *povero cristiano*, meaning a suffering man.

7 – It is unlikely that cemeteries closed at midnight. Here the midnight hour, associated with the spirits apparition, is chosen to condense the action.

8–Like almost all the puns in the poem, this play on the word *Natale* (Christmas) cannot be translated properly. The exact term should be “origins” but “natale” is used because similar to the word “Natale” which is ironically repeated in the next stanza together with the name of two other religious holydays. The triad is a typical Neapolitan exclamation to suggest great pomp.



La Ruota (The Wheel) – Church of the Annunziata, Naples

