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Zo d'Axa
Little Girls
1895

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Little Girls

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Little girls were judged this afternoon in Milan.

And it wasn't the sad trial — in absentia, of course — of a child caught on a bench with a stiff magistrate.

I watched the questioning as it unfolded.

It concerned an anarchist demonstration where, among resolute men and hardy women, two young girls of fourteen and fifteen were arrested.

The dark Maria had a strange charm, with her decisive air of a rascally young man, with her short curly hair, and her dark, fiery eyes. She had a way of looking at these messieurs of the court that was a form of silent, indefinable insolence — it worked better than throwing a shoe.

And when she spoke it wasn't at all in a way that would make one smile. Her short phrases had meaning and were accentuated by sure gestures.

"How can you talk about anarchy?" the judge muttered, "You don't even know what it is."

"And you have studied anarchy more closely? So it exists. Will you teach me about it?"

No, little one, they won't teach you anything! Revolt is instinctual. And theory is too often puerile. You know everything if you feel how filthy it is to live this bestial life.

Ernesta Quartirolo, a year younger, has an equally characteristic beauty. Her nascent beauty is serious, enigmatic. And she could be a proud statue of the future signifying...who knows what.

Her silence is haughty. She makes it seem as if it has nothing to do with her. A yes, a no, a shrug of the shoulders and that's all.

But the dark Maria, Maria Roda, with her defiant attitude, doesn't allow the parade of prosecution witnesses to continue their uninterrupted march. Her replies indicate the halts. She set loose a chain of insults about the shameful informers and professional squealers.

She has a riposte for each of them. A riposte that reaches its mark.

An agent of the *Pubblica Sicurezza* recites his learned lesson against her. Miss Roda encouraged the demonstrators to rush the police, she carried on like she was possessed, she shouted at everyone, she even insulted the brigadier!

"What is your answer?" the president admonished her.

"I pity this guard. I pity him because he barely earns his bread, because he's a poor devil. But it impresses me to see him go after other poor devils, his brothers...let him think about this."

And with a gesture of grace towards the miserable one who had just accused her, she perhaps had just thrown a first revealing ray upon this dark spirit.

This is how the sisters of our companions showed themselves, they who are of an age when others have barely stopped playing with dolls, or when the daughters of bourgeois begin to amuse themselves in games of love with little cousins or some elderly friend of the family.

Prison was imposed. The men of the court were generous. Ernesta and Maria will know three months of jail — and the little ones must also pay a fine to these messieurs.

Three hundred francs demanded from poor little girls!

It's cynical, but that's the way it is ...

A moment before the Tribunal retired to consider the condemnation, the man in red said to Maria:

"Do you have anything to add?"

"Nothing, since it would be pointless."

And that was the final word. Not gay, but flagellant.

It is said over and over that Milan is a little Paris. The magistrates of Milan prove this, at least on one point; they are every bit as repugnant as their Parisian confreres.

And anyway, isn't the magistracy the same everywhere? And could it be otherwise?

And this is probably even the reason that wherever you go the memory of the fatherland follows you. It comes upon you like nausea when you see the vileness of a judge.