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Princess Laudomia Hercolani
The Roman Beauty with a Salt of Wit and Generosity
by Milton Gendel

In one of Ian Fleming's dashing novels, a character in Venice flings her hat into the hero's gondola, saying, "My name is Domietta, but you may call me Dom." ... This is the high hand of Fleming - known for culling the lustrous and exciting - making literary capital of a fleeting view of Princess Hercolani. To her friends Laudomia Hercolani is Domietta, an affectionate diminutive the English have proprietarily docked to Dom.

Princess Hercolani on first sight is instantly unlike other people. And there is more to it than a classic construction of countenance and a catalogue of superb physical features. The essence of her beauty is that its immediate effect is sustained and enhanced by the personality so happily housed in the flesh. When she speaks - and it may be between long, unworried silences - she has something to say. Interchangeably fluent in Italian, English, and French, she can be eloquent and intense - in discussions with an unknown poet, a famous movie director, a Deputy of Parliament, or anyone with an opinion to offer - on the merits of Decadentismo in Italian contemporary literature, Scialoja's exhibition, Zeffirelli's stage set, Bergman, Antonioni, Fellini and Visconti, or the governments tax program. Her animation and intensity die, however, in the face of aimlessness or foolishness; the low-toned voice utters flatly crushing monosyllables through down - turned lips, and the dark gaze of the improbably large eyes is fixed somewhere on the middle distance.

Domietta Hercolani is a woman who knows her own handsomely furnished mind, a woman who finds genuine pleasure in her working life as art director and assistant director of movies. Her practical efficiency and her knowledge of literature and history - accumulated during an isolated bookish childhood, a blue-stocking adolescence - were used by the great Italian director, Luchino Visconti, in planning the striking sets for his movie, *The Leopard*. Visconti, like the Princess, does not suffer dilettantes gladly - if at all.

Refreshingly, the Princess has no leaden ballast of self-importance. Her manner is spiced with dry wit and leavened with generosity. A bemused admirer who insistently referred to himself as "a real toad in an imaginary garden," one day received a very large silver toad from Bulgari's accompanied by a line which said, "Perhaps you got the quotation wrong and it is an imaginary toad in a real garden."