

**Il Messaggero**  
**Sunday, 17th March 1968**

### **The Biggest Toad in Europe**

Loud conversation in the salone next to the bedroom awakened me. "It's some sort of frog", said the flat voice of Francesco Coppola, the deaf Neapolitan painter, who had the run of the house and had been spending the last few nights on a sofa in the livingroom. "It 's a frog", shouted Natale Picionello, the Sicilian butler. I said loudly, "Damned fools, you don't know anything about nature. You are just urbanites and couldn't identify a blade of grass." I walked into the salone and added, conclusively, "It is a toad". Francesco replied, "It *was* a toad".

They were standing in the middle of the big room. Natale, as usual looking damp and oppressed, was holding a broom. At their feet lay spreadeagled the body of a large toad. Some blood had dribbled from its mouth on to the black and white tiles of the floor. I was furious. "Natale, you killed it with the broom! Can't you sweep around the house without massacring everything in sight?"

Natale was mortified, and Francesco interceded, "Oh come on! What was the poor fellow supposed to do? It's frightening when you are suddenly confronted with a disgusting beast like this". "Disgusting beast!", I said indignantly. "They don't harm anyone. They do good. They eat mosquitoes. You are barbarian ignoramuses." Francesco, offended, went muttering out of the apartment. I picked up the dead toad, found some newspaper to wrap it in, and with resentful dignity went to the kitchen to put it in the garbage pail. Natale, futilely solicitous, followed me. I wouldn't look at him. "I'll have some coffee", I said coldly, and went back to the salone and sat at my desk.

The evening before, as I was driving back from a visit to friends near Frascati the headlights picked out two toads squatting in the middle of the road. I had never seen any toads that big. They were almost the size of small chickens. I brought them home in a cardboard box, which I had put out on the salone balcony before going to bed. One of the toads had evidently clambered out of the box and kept its Appointment in Samara at the end of Natale's broom. I went to look into the box, which stood under a *pitosfero* plant. The second toad was hunched gloomily in a corner. Natale appeared with the coffee, so I returned to my desk and sat there, not meeting his glance, as he set down the tray.

He kept lingering and I was finally obliged to look up. "*Dottore*", he said,. "about the toad, I am really very sorry." "Yes", I said heatedly, " that was an inconsiderate thing to do...and to think that what was perhaps the biggest toad in Europe came to an end like that." "But, *Dottore*, I didn't have any idea at all that it was *your* toad. If I had I would never have touched it. Though seeing an animal like that suddenly appearing in front of me..." "All right, Natale", I said "It's pointless to go on with this *post mortem*. But look, there's another toad in that box on the balcony. It's not quite as big as the dead one, but don't you go killing it on me".

"Oh no, *Dottore*, I wouldn't do that now that I know it is your toad. I'll take a string and tie one end to the leg of the desk and the other to its paw, poor thing So no one will walk on it when it's dark and it can't jump up on our bed."

“What nonsense! How on earth could it jump up on your bed?”

“Well, it’s a big thing and then there is something I’ve been meaning to tell you for some time. *Dottore*, if it isn’t too much trouble would you mind coming to our room for a moment?”

I went with him to the room behind the kitchen he shared with his wife, Annamaria, who did the cooking and laundry. As we came in, Annamaria, a small, timid, blond woman, shoved something under the bed. Her *Buon giorno Dottore* was accompanied by the sound of worried peeping. She was embarrassed. Natale pulled a crate from under the bed, which was full of downy little chicks. “This isn’t what I wanted to show you. I got them to take out to the little plot we have at Monterotondo. We are taking them there tomorrow on our day off. What I wanted to show you is the ceiling here. You may not have noticed the strips of paper I pasted up there?”

I hadn’t been in their room since the day after they moved in, when I had gone there to see they had everything they needed. I had noticed the pieces of paper pasted on the ceiling, especially as among the bits of newspaper and scraps there were two sheets of my writing paper with engraved letterhead. I had intended to tell Natale that this paper was not for household use, but had forgotten to do so.

“Oh yes”, I said, “that paper has my engraved address, and it would be better not to use it for the household.”

“*Dottore*, it was an emergency. The night we arrived here and were sleeping soundly in this bed I was awakened at three in the morning by Anamaria, terrified, who shook me awake and said, Listen! She was looking at the ceiling, so I looked up too. There was the sound of rustling and scuffling Bits of plaster fell on our faces and the bed clothes. Suddenly a small hole appeared in the ceiling and more plaster fell on us. The hole grew larger. We jumped out of bed. Annamaria ran and stood in a corner. I seized a broom and waited. The hole was as big as the face of a wristwatch. The muzzle of something appeared in the opening. It looked at us with little black eyes ad reached out with one of its paws...”

“It was a rat.”

“*Nossignore*, it was not a rat.. And I took the broom and jumped on the bed and aimed a great blow at the creature...”

“It was a bat.”

“No, *Dottore*, it was not a bat. God only knows what the thing was. Anyway it disappeared. I ran into the salone to look for something to stop the hole. I could only find your letterhead paper, so I took the liberty of appropriating two sheets, which I pasted over the new hole and an old one over there, next to it.”

“But a sheet of paper wouldn’t keep it out, would it?”

“No, but my wife mixed some colored beans and put a little heap of them with a piece of garlic inside, beside each hole.”

“Oh, in case it wasn’t a real animal. That is, an ordinary animal.”

“Yes, and other nights until recently, when we heard the noises and the plaster would fall, I’d do the same.” His arm swept an arc including all the bits of paper on the ceiling. “So you see, I am sorry about your toad, but when I came on it unexpectedly this morning, naturally I thought...”

That day Natale tied the second toad to the leg of the desk, but the next morning the string lay on the floor with nothing at the end of it. I looked at the end, and it appeared to have been bitten through, which was odd since toads have no teeth. Later in the day I took the dog, Zampe, for a walk in Piazza Navona. Francesca was sitting by the big fountain eyeing some girls who were snapping photographs of each other. Zampe lingered behind relieving herself. Francesco burst out laughing. “Look at that!” he shouted. Where Zampe had been lay a forepaw of the second toad.