

The Donkey of Vincento
By
Joseph Devon

In the village of Vincento, just north of the hill country, there is a common saying amongst the people when someone is being too boastful or thick headed. You'll often hear it uttered that someone is being, "*Gravid Acciastona*," or, "The True Fool," or very common too, "The Ass of Vincento." It is a wonderful play on words when spoken in the native language, but more and more one hears it nowadays in translation, a move which seems to shake the saying of all its touching connotations for I feel that most people who speak it now have no grasp of its story of origin.

You see, awhile ago in Vincento there lived a young boy named Theodore. Most everyone called Theodore by the nickname *Pullazo*, which, in the language of the people, means "donkey." This nickname was the result of a joke Theodore's uncle played on him when he was a little boy involving the family donkey. There is no need to go into that here except to mention that the nickname Pullazo was a harmless one and, when used by his friends and family, was not uttered with insult in mind.

Now, Pullazo was very close with the farrier's son, Demetrius, and the two had been friends since before either of them could remember, before, in fact, Pullazo had been known by any name other than Theodore. The two lads were inseparable despite Demetrius being a few years older than Pullazo, and they were often seen about town or playing in the fields, usually with Demetrius's younger sister, Penelope, in tow. While growing up Penelope was often made to play the role of the princess being rescued from dragons by the two brave fighters or the lamb being rescued from the wolves by the two brave farmers, or the village girl being rescued from bandits by the two brave *robeillers*.

Of course, Pullazo and Demetrius would also play any number of games that had no part for Penelope, and she spent many afternoons sitting and watching her brother play with Pullazo in the fields and she came to know the sound of Pullazo's laugh, the shape of his shoulders in their course linen shirt, the crook in his nose where it had been broken when he fell as a young boy. She came to know these things very well, and came to love them deeply, although Pullazo did not pay any attention to her at all.

And she also came to know of Pullazo's love for Helen, the daughter of the silk merchant who spent his summers in the large house to the south of the village where the orchards began. Helen had first shown up in town when Pullazo and Penelope were maybe twelve years old, and Penelope had been standing there, next to Pullazo, when he first laid eyes on Helen. Pullazo swore under his breath when he saw the silk merchant's daughter and, with the whispered awe of a young boy, proclaimed himself in love.

Penelope followed the gaze of Pullazo to see this girl Helen, a very tall girl whose nose seemed constantly turned up and whose eyes seemed to not want to even glance down at the dirt road she stood on as if they were afraid of getting dirty. When Pullazo gasped in awe; Penelope wrinkled her nose and clandestinely spat in the dirt. Helen, mistaking Pullazo for the servant boy that had accompanied her into town, snapped her fingers and ordered Pullazo to fetch her some water from the well at the crossroads. Pullazo ran and obeyed her instantly, his smile never leaving his face as he lugged a pitcher from the well and handed Helen a dipper full of water. Helen drank her water and handed him back the dipper before forgetting about him instantly.

Demetrius, a few years older and no stranger to the effects of a girl on a boy's heart, laughed at the look on his friend's face as Pullazo held his chest. Penelope scowled.

Pullazo's adoration of Helen increased every time he saw her, which was none too often as she only summered in Vincento and infrequently made trips into town. But the occasional glimpse was enough to keep his heart beating strong for Helen, and more and more years came to pass. Demetrius and Pullazo didn't play in the fields anymore. Instead Pullazo worked in the fields while Demetrius worked in his father's shop. Penelope, naturally, grew up as well, learning from her mother how to care for her brother and father and growing into a beautiful young lady herself, although one that Pullazo still paid no mind to.

It was late in the summer during one of these years when word spread through the town that the silk merchant was going to throw a festival for the village during the holy days of the local saint.

At first this was only treated as rumor, the braying of the local drunkards and nothing more. But as the month began to pass, carts full of salted meats and large wheels of cheese could be seen passing through the village square on their way up to the silk merchant's house. And a troop of painters was hired to whitewash the walls of the town square and spread crushed limestone over the dirt so that it practically glowed with cleanliness. But it was the giant barrels of wine and beer rolling past on the carts that convinced everyone that the banquet was for real, and that was when all the shops closed for repainting, and the woodworkers in town were kept busy sprucing up the balconies overlooking the square, and the town's seamstresses were flooded with orders for the best possible outfits that the local women could afford.

Everyone was making plans, and this included Pullazo and Demetrius. They both knew that if the silk merchant was throwing the banquet, then the silk merchant's daughter was sure to be there. Both young men were convinced that this was Pullazo's best chance to win Helen's heart. There were many talks during those late summer months in the farrier's shop where the two young men would argue over how to best impress Helen. The arguments always ended with Demetrius shouting louder than Pullazo, loud enough to silence his younger friend, and Demetrius would say, with a calm pat on Pullazo's back, "You have to believe me, Pullazo, I'm a man who understands women."

Penelope was never far out of earshot during these conversations. Being a whole year younger than Pullazo, she was only being allowed by her father to attend the children's portion of the event, the puppet show and the afternoon music and the early supper, and was not being allowed to return in the evening for the more formal dance. She had argued with her father about this until her ears grew hot, but there was no relenting and she was often in a foul mood during those days. Listening to Pullazo and Demetrius talk about how best to court Helen did nothing to improve her mindset. Indeed, it happened quite often that she would come back from unsuccessfully pleading her case to her father to let her go to the dance only to be forced to sit and listen to Demetrius telling Pullazo such pieces of advice as, "Be sure and tell her you own a horse, not a donkey," or, "Be sure to wet your hair down before you ask her to dance. She won't say yes if your hair is sticking up."

The two would start arguing about this point or that and then they would start yelling and finally Demetrius would shout over Pullazo and gain control of the conversation and would end things with a simple, "You've got to realize, Pullazo, I'm a man who understands women."

The day of the festival came and everyone filled the town square and enjoyed the dancing and music and wine and food. There was a race where the winner received a beautiful garland of flowers, and a show of the traditional *babonyas* which made the little

children shriek with laughter. Then the afternoon began to fade and the people made their way back to their homes, some to retire for the evening, some to prepare for the more formal dance later that night.

Pullazo bid goodbye to his family and went to Demetrius's house to get ready. Upstairs the two young men put themselves together for the dance. They argued over who would wear the nicer pants, and who would get to ride to the gardens and who would be in charge of leading the donkey when he refused to pull the cart and arrive at the dance with mud on their shoes. They bathed and dressed and poked fun at each other and tried to hide how nervous they were, and Penelope sat in the downstairs room listening to them joke and yell and thump about upstairs, and she folded her arms and stared into the corner and tried to pretend that she did not care.

Then they were tromping down the stairs, Demetrius throwing his hat up high in the air before ducking and running to catch it on his head as it fell, standing upright and beaming before Pullazo tried the same trick and missed, his hat dropping to the ground, Penelope giggling into her dress as she watched. But her giggle soon died and hurt filled her face as Demetrius confidently declared, "By the end of tonight, Pullazo, you will be one with Helen."

Then they were out the front door, Demetrius's father throwing words of advice and warnings about the dangers of too much wine and too little sense as they went to the barn and led the donkey out. A quick few minutes later and the cart was attached. Demetrius clambered up into it and stood as Pullazo tugged at the donkey's halter, a scene that caused Demetrius no end of delight as he made joke after joke about the "donkey" leading the donkey.

Eventually Pullazo got the stubborn animal to pull the cart along and they disappeared into the lane and headed into town. Penelope watched from the doorway, and as the sound of the cart's wheels faded into the darkness her eyes filled with tears.

Later that night, when the moon was a bright white crescent hanging over the horizon, the two boys returned. They were both in the cart, the donkey for the moment having been convinced to pull without any need of encouragement. Demetrius was cradling a jug of wine in the crook of his arm and Pullazo was staring up at the stars.

"Maybe it wasn't meant to be," Demetrius said.

Pullazo didn't answer.

"Maybe she overheard us talking about owning a donkey instead of a horse," Demetrius said.

Pullazo didn't answer.

Demetrius continued making suggestions and Pullazo remained silent while they put the donkey back in the stable and the cart back in the barn and made their way towards the house.

Waiting in the doorway was Penelope, who watched as Pullazo began to say his goodbyes, his downturned face sad and without joy.

"What happened?" she asked.

"The silk merchant's daughter," Demetrius answered, "she didn't pay poor Pullazo any attention, and when he asked her to dance," Demetrius made an obscene gesture with his two fingers, "she snubbed him."

Penelope's face grew flushed with hidden happiness as she heard this.

"I can't figure out what went wrong," Demetrius said, "I was *positive* something would happen tonight. And *I* know women."

Pullazo didn't say anything, just turned and began walking towards the path to begin making his way home. When he had gone a little ways, Penelope, quick as you can, darted out through the door to run after him. She caught up to him at the wooden fence and Demetrius heard her talking to Pullazo, then Pullazo answering, then some more talking until Demetrius's face brightened up as he heard his friend burst into happy laughter over something Penelope had said. With that laughter, Demetrius knew his friend was no longer heartbroken over the silk merchant's daughter.

He was amazed, and when Penelope came back to the house he asked her, awestruck, "I told him joke after joke on the ride home, how did you fix the broken heart of my friend so quickly?"

Penelope was beaming, her love showing on her face, and she stood up on tiptoe and kissed her brother on the cheek, then said the words that became so famous, the last part especially, in the town of Vincento.

"Maecenas odio ante consecetuer pullazo, uscevitale risus mauris sollicitudin; phasellus statione, liber necanto adipiscing gravid acciastona!"

Or, in the lesser tongue, "Your friend may be the one we call donkey, but never have I been so happy that my brother is the true ass of the town!"

About the Author:

Joseph Devon was born in New Jersey. He grew up and began to write books. For a longer version of this story be sure and visit him online. You can always find news about his latest books, recent short fiction and all things Joseph Devon at www.JosephDevon.com. You can also buy a hard copy of what you just read. Drop by, you'll be glad you did.



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