

Journeys of a Prodigal Son



The pre-history of Niccolò Umberto

In which it is told of the rise and eventual fall of the Umbertos from the Year 1190 until 1552 when one Niccolò Umberto is banished from the family keep, once part of a now ruined castle, by his brother Frederick subsequent to the death of their father.

On the tenth of June in the year 1190 the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa, died. While engaged in the Third Crusade, he died in the Saleph River in what is now Turkey but was then the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. There is, however, dispute about the circumstances of his death. Was he thrown from his horse and drowned, weighed down by his armour? Did he suffer a heart attack in the river while bathing? Was the current too strong for a man in his sixties cooling down on a hot day? All this is in dispute. So little is known of the circumstances of his death. What is also little known is that the one who risked his own life to retrieve Barbarossa's body was a very minor noble called Oddo Umberto. In some circles of the time, Oddo Umberto was known as Umberto the Insignificant.

There is much we don't know. For example, the fact that Oddo Umberto had not been as selfless as chroniclers of the time would have you believe. You see, Oddo Umberto, in a slimy attempt to ingratiate himself with the great leader or perhaps promote himself, had, earlier that day, given Barbarossa a rather large gold signet ring. Umberto had had the ring made up at great expense; an expense he could little afford. His plan was to give the ring to the emperor in the hope of currying future favours. He had waited and waited throughout the crusade for just the right moment to present the emperor with the ring.

On the face of the signet ring there was an oversized *U*. It is

telling that when Oddo Umberto had given the ring to Frederick Barbarossa, he made much of the *U*. Umberto claimed that it signified Barbarossa's superiority over all men as the *U* stood for the Germanic word *Über; über* meaning superior. It is not without irony that the *U* also stood for Oddo's family name. By giving Barbarossa the ring with its giant *U*, it is possible that Oddo was claiming affiliation with, rather than honouring, the emperor. We'll never know.

No one knows when on that hot June day Oddo Umberto presented Barbarossa with the ring but it is a fact that he did so, and it is a universally unknown fact the emperor was wearing that ring when he hit the water and subsequently, one way or another, died. Umberto was one of the few who had seen the emperor enter the water yet there were certainly many witnesses who saw Umberto rush to retrieve the emperor's body from the water. What was not known to those onlookers was that Oddo Umberto had rushed to Barbarossa's body to surreptitiously retrieve the signet ring he had given the emperor earlier that day. All that was visible to those onshore was Oddo Umberto retrieving the emperor's body; this was sufficient to label Oddo Umberto as a selfless hero. He had entered the water as Umberto the Insignificant and emerged carrying Barbarossa's body as Umberto the Selfless.

Selfless heroes who risk their lives to save an emperor should be rewarded, and so it was that Oddo Umberto was rewarded. He was rewarded immediately by Barbarossa's son Henry naming Oddo the next Holy Roman Emperor. And he was eventually rewarded by Pope Celestine III.

In a show of honouring the deceased, Holy Roman Emperor Oddo vowed to the next Holy Roman Emperor that from now until the end of days, any firstborn Umberto son would be given the name the Frederick. On hearing this the next Holy Roman Emperor glared at Oddo and said, 'That's all very well, but what if any one of these future Fredericks of yours has no sons or, worse still, no offspring – then what?'

Obviously Oddo had not thought out his offer of naming rights

and rashly replied, 'High One, there'll be no worry over this as there will always be sons.' And whether by miracle or by some genetic quirk, future Umbertos were to produce at least one son per senior Frederick.

Rewards for Oddo came in the form of an elevated title status and acquisition of confiscated lands in the Piedmont region. The titles gave Umberto entrée into portions of society to which he had been previously denied. Such access led to opportunities for increased wealth but, more importantly, it led to his profitable marriage to Beatrice, the daughter of a prince from the Kingdom of Sicily. With that marriage came more land which, coupled with the lands he had been given in Piedmont, generated wealth from tenants and profitable agriculture.

The Umbertos were now on their way up and subsequent generations of Fredericks were astute enough to increase the family's wealth and prestige. Wealth and prestige came not only from firstborn sons but also from other birth order children. Amongst lower birth order sons there were cardinals, including one who was a close run second for the papacy; there were military leaders who almost always fought on the winning side; there were entrepreneurs who financed great projects from which they were the ones who profited most. As for the daughters, beautiful or not, the family's rising fortunes were more than enough to secure favourable marriages for each of them – except for those who, for reasons best known to themselves, became nuns.

The trajectory of the Umberto family's fortunes and influences was, for three centuries, unstoppable and ever upwards, but like all things a downward turn was inevitable. Anything that goes up must eventually come down, for such is the law of family providence.

So by the early 1500s things had already soured for the Umbertos. By that time, too many Fredericks had made too many bad choices – ranging from backing losing sides in wars or making the wrong wagers at the tables to aggravating those more powerful than themselves. But all their misfortunes could not be attributed to wars,

gambling or getting on the wrong side of the very powerful. Plague and dwindling returns from agricultural products from Umberto lands also played a part. And there was plague often. Plague reduced the pool of peasants – peasants whom the Umbertos had exploited to work Umberto land. Diminishing peasant numbers made it more difficult to turn a profit from their labours.

Plague should know no class, but for some reasons it sought out the Umbertos and hit them with a ferocity it had not meted out to other folk. Perhaps the genetic quirk that had assured a supply of sons in each generation was responsible for an extraordinary susceptibility to plague. In sweeps of the plague's scythe, too many of the Umbertos' brightest and youngest were eliminated – leaving only the dullards and the very old. Dullards and the very old are not great material to maintain family fortunes, let alone rebuild it.

By the mid-1500s, all that was left of the Umbertos was an old man, Frederick the elder, and his two sons, Frederick the younger and Niccolò; Frederick the elder's wife had died in childbirth during the delivery of Niccolò. As for the Umberto fortunes all had, by this time, been lost, other than a fraction of land in Piedmont that Oddo Umberto had been rewarded with in the twelfth century. That fraction of land that remained in the mid-1500s contained a small number of tenant farmers and a ramshackle castle tower which the last of the Umbertos used as their home. The Umbertos were now once again where it all began in 1190 – insignificant.

Frederick the younger was the favourite son and Niccolò was merely tolerated by both Fredericks. Frederick the elder never ceased blaming Niccolò for causing the difficult birth that had led to the death of his wife. He saw no value in this son and thanked God that Niccolò had not been his firstborn. On the other hand, the elder Frederick was besotted by his namesake and this son, Frederick the younger, could do no wrong. In all he did, Frederick the younger excelled – a sharp mind, an accomplished horseman and pious to a fault. Frederick the elder was sure that when he died he would be passing on what was left of the estate to a worthy inheritor. He was

comforted by the thought that this son might be the one who would rebuild the Umberto reputation and fortune.

There was no love lost between the brothers and they despised each other. Each saw in his brother all that was bad in the world and so when Frederick the elder died Frederick the younger banished his brother from the household and all their lands in Piedmont. To tell the truth, Niccolò didn't see it as a banishment rather it was fraternal permission to strike out and be his own man unencumbered by the shadow of his sanctimonious brother.

Frederick had, of course, inherited all whereas Niccolò inherited nought except for a gold signet ring with an outsized U – the very same ring that Oddo Umberto had given to and retrieved from Barbarossa on the tenth of June 1190.

Journey to Find Out What Happened



THE WAR ENDED AND the Americans marched through Paris in tight formations down the Champs Elysées just as the Germans had done four years earlier. To tell the truth, the Germans had marched in tighter formations; they were more serious about it than the Americans. Maybe that's the difference between invaders and liberators. All that aside, what's the difference? Germans or Americans? Each time for us it was foreigners marching down the Champs Elysées. Foreigners who wore different uniforms. Foreigners who spoke a different language. So, at least for me, apart from that there was no difference; they were both strangers.

I suppose I've always sat on the fence. Nothing wrong with that, is there? Sure, you get a sore arse but you also get a clearer view of what's on either side of the fence. One side thinks their side is a manicured park and the other's an unkempt weed-ridden abomination. Well, I can tell you for starters they're both wrong. Sit on my fence and you'll see a maze of messy hedges on both sides.

As I said, the Americans came to Paris and there were crowds dancing in the streets and all that *fin de la guerre* release of emotion. The invaders had been driven out but after the jubilation was over, which by the way I didn't experience, and after the last liberator had left France, I was still wading through treacle. All my life I had waded through treacle; you don't get anywhere fast and it saps your energy.

I was ready for my life to improve. That's not to say that I didn't do well enough during the war. There had been many ways to look after yourself and please your readers at the same time. They say war is hell and maybe it is, but war can be good for an enterprising writer; I found that it was so.

Look, I've forgotten to tell you my name. It's Martin Houx and if you haven't heard about me, then all I can say is you've been reading the wrong newspapers. In 1940 I was writing for *Paris Matin*. The Germans came in and my style of writing went out; I suppose the *Paris Matin* owners wanted to be careful of what appeared in their paper. Look, I don't blame them for that. A consequence of the coming of the Nazis was that I was ingloriously dumped by the paper.

I took it on the chin, as the cliché goes. After that I had to live by my wits. I even stooped to writing advertisements. Well so what! I'll defend myself and say that someone has to write advertising junk – otherwise nobody would buy *Eau de Javel*, would they?

As for as my metier? Well, I did a bit of freelancing here and there for any rag that had the nerve to take me. Some might say I'd become a journalistic whore. Most of us do some whoring just to get by. Nevertheless, I defy anyone to say I was a hack. I managed to sell articles despite the Germans. And I'd say those articles were good, very good. It's strange but the occupation had improved my writing. I even started a novel but then don't we all. How many times have you heard someone say they're writing a novel? Too many times, no doubt. What's more, they'll keep saying it year after year after year and blah, blah, blah. I reckon it's the refuge of the would-be writer, because for as long as you keep saying you're writing a novel, no one can say you aren't a writer. Enough said about that. So where was I? Well I was with the Germans gone, the Americans gone, me wading through treacle and it was the summer of 1947.

That summer, July, after the fireworks at Versailles on the 14th, I first met Madame D'Eze on the train back to Paris. You know how it is – a festive evening, some wine, maybe a bit too much wine, and a plump, jolly woman on a rocking train. Of course you get to talking. And Madame D'Eze and I got to talking about this and that, so much so that by the time we got off the train at Saint-Lazare, she had invited me to visit her at her apartment in the 19th arrondissement the following day. Don't get me wrong. Nothing sexual here at the time. She was just a jolly, plump middle-aged woman I found amusing.

By the autumn, you could say Madame D'Eze and I were friends. That's not to say that even by autumn I knew much about her. I knew that she lived off the Rue Manin. Her apartment was small – just a kitchenette, a lounge room and a bedroom. And, as it was so unfortunately common in those years, a communal toilet and washroom off the landing. I suppose the apartment seemed smaller than it was owing to the furniture. The lounge room had a large, tall, canopied

sideboard, a dining table with seating for eight, and wedged between the wall and dining table there was an enormous glass-fronted bookcase. I deduced that Madame D'Eze was no reader, as the bookcase was devoid of books and instead contained a jumble of hats, scarves and shoes. And framed photos. I mustn't forget her all-important framed photos. To further add to the crowding of the lounge room, there was an oversized comfortable sofa and two heavily padded armchairs. Her bedroom, well I wouldn't be a gentleman if I told you more than the fact that the bed, like the lounge room's sofa, was large and comfortable. All things considered, Madame D'Eze was like her sofa, armchairs and bed – amply padded and comfortable to sink into.

Did we eventually love each other? No, we didn't love each other. It was more that we enjoyed the occasions we spent together and at the time, I couldn't imagine I required anyone else's company other than hers. She was the armchair, sofa and bed I needed at the time. Plump, soft and pliant for a man wading in treacle. And for her, I suppose I was ... well, I don't really know what I was to her, other than I made her laugh. I suppose if I made her laugh then I must have made her happy. And so tell me, does any woman need more?

Were we in lust? I don't think so. There was no wild madness in our physical passion; instead, it had all the mundaneness of an itch that needed scratching. It was necessary. It felt good and when it was done, an irritant had been satisfied. An itch satisfactorily put to bed, so to speak.

You might find this odd but throughout our time together, I only called her Madame D'Eze. Only Madame D'Eze, that's all. There was never any need to enquire what her first name was. I ask you, if I'd known would it have made any difference? Our relationship would have been just the same whatever her label, and Shakespeare had something to say about that many years ago. But if she was a Madame D'Eze, where was Monsieur D'Eze?

Despite there being a wedding ring on her ring finger, she never mentioned a husband and I didn't ask. Bizarrely, or perhaps out of

some sense of decorum, a prelude to our lovemaking was for her to always remove that ring. For all I know, the absent Monsieur D'Eze may never have existed and the wedding ring was an affectation. It is possible the putative husband may have abandoned the marriage or he may have died in the war. You see, it was a time when many spouses left the marriage or had died in the war. There was, however, an adult son, the subject of all those framed photos. Her son – Patrick D'Eze – I was to meet later.



Winter was upon us and I was still with Madame D'Eze. Most people hate winter but I don't. I don't mind the early darkness, the cold winds and damp air. I find it's a time of withdrawing into yourself. It's a time for savouring a modicum of luxury such as the warmth from the orange glow of a single-bar radiator. It's a time for planning but not acting.

Madame D'Eze had the same liking for those cold dark months as I did. We discovered that what we really liked about the season was that the universe had closed in around us. It was like the perfection that comes in lovemaking when the rest of the world could go to hell or vaporise. All that mattered was that moment and the two of us. We, Madame D'Eze and I, lived through that winter as if we were the only people in existence. Nothing else existed.

Her poorly heated apartment meant that the only warm place was under the feathered doona of her bed. Our winter passed mainly in that bed. Time passed in the paradise of the large comfortable bed. Time passed in the warmth of our embraces. Time passed punctuated by blanket-wrapped excruciatingly cold dashes to the landing's WC.

It was a time we made plans and promises to each other, promises we knew would never be consummated. But that didn't matter because it was the making of those plans and promises that helped keep us warm. In the end it was obvious, to me at least, that what was good about winter was the proofing yourself against winter.

My Journey with the Nixons and Others



Prologue

Last night I dreamed about Cliffy Nixon. Sometimes I dream about all the Nixons and my times with them. I dream about Cliffy's parents, Mr and Mrs Nixon, that's Clarrie and Joyce. I dream about his sister Noelene whom everyone called Gypsy, though she had pale Nordic features and not a drop of Romany in her. I dream about Melvin Marx who was with us just a brief time. And about Paddy O'Sullivan whose short time with the Nixons was far too long for Mr Nixon. I even dream about Asparagus. For years after Cliffy Nixon and I drifted apart, there were occasional thoughts like: *Why did Cliffy go? Where did he go?* Other than that, I've just lived my life.

Mr and Mrs Nixon

LIKE EVERY PREVIOUS OBSESSION Mr Nixon had embraced, he failed at singing. He took singing lessons from a Signor Garibaldi. Mr Nixon referred to his singing teacher as *The Eyetalian*. While Cliffy, that's the Nixon's son, and I knew that *signor* was Italian for mister, we thought the teacher's name was Gary Baldy.

Well, getting back to Mr Nixon and singing. The plain fact of the matter was that he didn't have a singing voice. If he attempted a deep baritone, he got chest pains and a sore throat. If he attempted falsetto, he went red in the face and felt that he would faint. Anything in between led to symptoms that were various combinations and to various degrees of the symptoms I've just mentioned. Let's face it, Mr Nixon just couldn't sing. He practised his *do-re-mi*-ing often, and when anyone heard him it was difficult to keep a straight face.

In the end the lessons and singing stopped. Mr Nixon told us he had had to fire Signor Garibaldi ... *Utterly useless! The bloody Eyetalian didn't have a clue.* Cliffy suspected Signor Garibaldi did have a clue and he had fired Mr Nixon, rather than it being the other way around. No, singing was not Mr Nixon's strong suit, but it segued nicely to his next obsession – his magnificent new musical obsession. The harpsichord! And with the harpsichord came Miss Wanda, the very buxom harpsichord player.

Look, I suppose the bottom line was that Mr Nixon had wanted to find his inner musical soul. Liberate the artiste that might have dwelled deep inside a man who was more than good at any task so long as it involved his hands. Well, maybe Miss Wanda helped him there, though perhaps that's not all Miss Wanda liberated in him.

It had often been said of Mr Nixon something like: *That Clarrie, jeez he's fantastic with his hands. Give him anything of a practical nature and he'll master it. Ever seen him work on a car, make a trailer or just mend a toaster? He can do it. He can do it all. The man's a master with his hands.* So is it any wonder he wanted to succeed at something that was different – like something in the creative arts?

After his failed at his singing obsession, he decided to build a harpsichord. When you look at it, the way Mr Nixon must have, it wasn't such a stupid idea. It was a perfect choice for him because it involved something that he was good at using, namely, his hands. There would be two elements at work here, something practical that would lead to something of artistic use. You see, his failure at singing had not extinguished his need for self-expression in the arts. In fact the failure had enflamed it. His plan was to build his own harpsichord (that's something practical) and then he would learn to play it (that's something practical and artistic). To cap it off, once he had mastered the instrument, he supposed, naturally, he would go on to compose music for the harpsichord, and that's something very artistic.

After he had parted ways with the singing Italian Signor Garibaldi, somehow and somewhere he got blueprints for making a harpsichord. In no time the blueprints were laid out on the workshop floor and he was ready to start. Mr Nixon worked long into the night on his harpsichord goal. He even took his meals out in the workshop, and throughout most of the night Mrs Nixon kept him supplied with endless cups of tea and Salada crackers with cheese, tomato and salt and pepper: *Lots of salt but just a sprinkle of pepper, Joycie.* On weekends he worked at it all day.

Being a genius with his hands and given the time he put into it, it's no wonder Mr Nixon actually ended up making a fully working harpsichord. The drawback, however, was that he couldn't play the harpsichord even if his life or the fate of the universe depended on it. Well, it's one thing to make a musical instrument and quite another thing to play one, but he was on his way to harpsichord paradise.

Enter Miss Wanda – the angel of harpsichord paradise!

Well, Miss Wanda was a hefty lady who had answered Mr Nixon's ad in the local paper for a harpsichord teacher. One wouldn't say she was beautiful but she was prettyish in a flat-faced, high-cheek-boned Magyar way. She was blonde, though it was suspected that came from a bottle, but what was significant to Cliffy was that she had substantial breasts ... huge, in fact.

On the one hand, Mr Nixon couldn't play the harpsichord, and on the other hand, Miss Wanda played a mean harpsichord. You think harpsichord and you automatically think Bach and all that classical stuff. Sure, Miss Wanda played classical but she also played jazz on Mr Nixon's harpsichord. Jazz on a harpsichord! According to Cliffy's suspicions: *She probably could play a mean organ – namely the upright organ.*

Cliffy suspected his father was tickling more than the ivories. If all roads led to Rome, then for Mr Nixon this was a time when all roads, streets and laneways led to Miss Wanda. When talking about her to others, Mr Nixon would start with: *Miss Wanda, that fine cut of a woman ...* then ... *blah, blah, blah ...* on and on about her. It pissed Cliffy off so much so that whenever she came up in our conversation, to mimic his father he would start with: *Miss Wanda, that not so fine cunt of a woman.* Look, to be honest, Cliffy did not have any evidence that something other than a mutual interest in the harpsichord was cooking on the stove between Miss Wanda and his father.

To cut a long story short, things came to a dramatic end in the following way. First Mrs Nixon was pissed off after Mr Nixon hired a signwriter to paint the name *Miss Wanda* in copperplate on the lid of the harpsichord. It was done in gold paint and very arty. There was even a scroll-like flourish under her name, sort of like the one you see under the word Coca on Coca-Cola signs. Next, probably after encouragement from Miss Wanda, Mr Nixon joined the Bayside Harpsichord Society where she was an office bearer. This meant he was out with her every Tuesday night at the Society's

weekly meetings. And if that wasn't bad enough, he was away all one entire weekend, presumably with her, at the Bayside Harpsichord Society's Annual Weekend Live-in Intensive. Now who's to say what happened at the Intensive? But it's certain that subsequent to that weekend, intense things happened.

Mr Nixon could not conceal the fact that he had been drummed out of the Bayside Harpsichord Society. Cliffy suspected his father had been fiddling when he should have been harpsichording. Mrs Nixon was devastated, but she was not devastated because Mr Nixon had been kicked out of the Society – oh no, her devastation came from thinking what might have lead up to Mr Nixon's expulsion. The closest Cliffy got to it all was overhearing Mrs Nixon accusing Mr Nixon of hanky-panky with that harpsichord slut. Maybe out of guilt or to appease Mrs Nixon, he burnt his harpsichord in a backyard bonfire. And Cliffy had the final word at the bonfire, saying, 'Well, there goes the hot harpy's *pissy* accord' – only to receive a withering look from his mother and a clip over the ear from his father.

Did Mr Nixon fail or succeed at the harpsichord? One can't say, but I can say as far as Cliffy could tell his parents became frostier with each other thereafter. So long harpsichord and so long Miss Wanda.