

The Corsetti family, new owners of Palazzo Podocataro, came from the Florentine branch and had been active in the Arenula region for years. Despite their noble roots, they found it difficult to gain acceptance into Rome's *nobiltà nera* (black nobility). The old Roman noble families closed ranks against newcomers like the Corsettis, Mazzetti di Pietralata, Torlonias, and others—wealthy but, in their view, lacking in good manners.

The Corsetti family's wealth came from their primary business as *spedizionieri* (expeditors), a profession that combined the roles of business agents and country merchants. They had practiced this trade for generations before coming to Rome. The last *spedizionario* in the Corsetti family, Luigi (Giovanni's father), handled vast sums of capital and letters of credit. Giovanni, operating on a smaller scale, focused on managing his small but solid private bank. Essentially, he lent money and accepted real estate—mainly houses, but also gardens, vineyards, plots of land, and even entire estates—as collateral.

The most renowned notaries of the *Curia Capitolina* and the *Auditor Camerae* were eager to secure Giovanni Corsetti's business. As a result, he frequently appeared in the records of at least a dozen notarial offices. These records often noted loans that had not been repaid, leading to the loss of mortgaged properties.

Giovanni Corsetti lived at Piazza Navona 86 and was the guarantor for a palace owned by the English College, which bordered Palazzo Podocataro. When the guarantee period ended, Giovanni exercised his right of preemption and purchased the palace for 6,000 gold scudi, replenishing the nearly empty coffers of the English College, which had been depleted by the French occupation. This was the second palace he bought through a standard purchase; the first was the adjacent Palazzo Podocataro, previously owned by the Orfini family of Foligno.

When Alessandro Orfini decided to sell, Giovanni saw the opportunity and quickly sealed the deal. The occasion was the upcoming marriage of his son Stanislao to Countess Donatilla Lezzani, daughter of Giuseppe Lezzani, another prominent figure in Roman finance. Like Corsetti, Giuseppe Lezzani owned numerous properties in the historic center, on the Corso, in the Castelli region, and just outside the city walls. Two properties stand out in particular: a splendid country villa on Via Nomentana, near the Mausoleum of Santa Costanza, and a vast vineyard outside Porta Pia, which had been purchased from Nicola Piccirilli, commander of Rome's military garrison and father of Carolina, wife of noble guard Michele Alvarez de Castro.

The marriage of Stanislao Corsetti to Donatilla Lezzani marked the union of two prominent Roman bourgeois families, further strengthened in 1847 by a second marriage. This time, Stanislao's sister, Giulietta, married another Lezzani, Massimiliano, who had taken over the family business after the death of his father, Giuseppe. Similarly, Stanislao would take over his father Giovanni's affairs. Gravely ill, Giovanni signed a general power of attorney in favor of his son on September 12, 1840. Giovanni died the following day, leaving Stanislao as the universal heir, with exceptions made for his wife Felice Corneli's rights and his sister Giulietta's dowry.

One thousand scudi from his wife Felice's dowry fund were loaned by Giovanni as a mortgage secured by the emphyteusis on the English College's palace, converting the capital into the purchase of Palazzo Podocataro. This type of Chinese box transaction was common in real estate deals involving large sums, where complex account maneuvers were needed, often leaving the weaker parties entangled, like chicks caught in straw. However, this was not the case for the Corsetti family, who were seasoned businessmen adept at navigating such waters.

The Corsetti family's acquisition of Palazzo Podocataro marked a shift in the use of the property, which had been focused on generating rental income for the last hundred years. It was now returned to its status as a noble family residence, with no space for tenants. Even the shops on the premises became exclusively for the use of Stanislao Corsetti, who had clear and long-term plans for his new palace.

The first to benefit from these changes was the collection of marbles, which had been scattered haphazardly in what was once Perin del Vaga's secret garden. The restoration of the palace began with the garden, which once again became a central element of the

patrician house, much like it had been during the time of Livio Podocataro. The restored Venus fountain became the focal point of the garden. Unfortunately, the precious frescoes by Perin del Vaga had already been lost, covered by heavy plaster, and the façade of the palace no longer showed any traces of the geometric decorations that had once adorned it. The century of neglect by the last Orfini family members in Rome had caused irreparable damage.

The apartments on the piano nobile, which had previously been artificially divided to create as many rentable units as possible, were restored to a single, unified space where Stanislao and Donatilla laid the foundation for their new family. By the time Giovanni passed away in 1840, Palazzo Podocataro-Corsetti had taken shape.

Stanislao was determined not to be outdone by his brothers-in-law, Lorenzo and Massimiliano Lezzani (Giulietta Corsetti's husband). The Lezzanis had transported and reconstructed a small Roman mausoleum, discovered during excavations on family land in Tor di Quinto, to their country villa on Via Nomentana, which is now Villa Blanc. Lorenzo Lezzani, a road builder for the Papal States, replaced the country farmhouse with a ten-room *casino per delizie* (pleasure house), which Massimiliano later expanded into a villa.

In response, Stanislao purchased two adjoining small palaces on Via del Pellegrino, numbers 105 to 108, which bordered the garden of Palazzo Podocataro-Corsetti. The building at numbers 105 and 106 was bought from Agostino Forti, while the one from 107 to 108 was acquired from Counts Rinaldo and Giuseppe Vallemani, as part of an inheritance from their father, Carlo.

The acquisition of these two palaces on Via del Pellegrino, along with the previously owned Corsetti palace, formerly part of the English College, allowed Stanislao to create a Corsetti "island," similar to the old noble family compounds. Once again, the garden became the heart of this "island," with all of Stanislao's properties facing it. This distinctive grouping of four palaces marked a pivotal moment for the Corsetti family. For the first time, the family was acquiring properties not through the foreclosure of defaulting debtors, but through deliberate purchases aimed at a long-term project. This strategy, successfully realized, helped establish the Corsetti family as part of Rome's new nobility.

Within the complex of buildings forming the Corsetti island, Palazzo Podocataro took on an 'institutional' role that would be passed down until 1902. For the Corsetti family, Palazzo Podocataro became the primary dowry for firstborn sons, featuring in all marriage contracts as the house for newlyweds. As a result, it became almost automatic for the father, upon his son's emancipation, to return to live in the historic Corsetti palace, leaving the ownership of Palazzo Podocataro-Corsetti to the firstborn.

Each change of ownership was, of course, accompanied by supposed improvements and renovations that, at least in theory, were intended to enhance the building. Unfortunately, these ‘improvements’ often ended up deforming, sometimes irreparably, the architectural harmony of the property. The most egregious damage was done to the beautiful loggia by Perin del Vaga, which, in 1900, was tragically sacrificed to create a small, insignificant room by blocking off the elegant arches. These arches, once the highlight of the building, were essential to its graceful appearance. This atrocity was carried out by Gustavo Corsetti, who, over seven years, married twice: first to the ill-fated Maria Lucernari in November 1856 (who died, possibly in childbirth, in 1860), and then, in February 1861, to Adele Polverosi, whose family lived in the adjoining palace. In the complex web of family connections, more common then than now, Gustavo’s marriage to Adele Polverosi indirectly connected the Corsettis to two other families in the neighborhood: the Pericoli family, bankers who owned the imposing Palazzo d’Aste, towering over Palazzo Podocataro, and the Alvarez de Castro family from Via della Scrofa, who also became linked to the Corsetti family through marriage.

Returning to the origins of Palazzo Podocataro-Corsetti, we trace the events of the 19th century and the changes in the Corsetti family during the second half of the century, a time marked by the fall of the Papal States and the rise of the Kingdom of Italy. Giovanni Corsetti, bolstered by the financial security inherited from his father Luigi, abandoned the traditional profession of ‘*spedizionario*’, a role as a business agent that had been successfully practiced for over two centuries by his ancestors, who were also major country merchants primarily involved in the import and export of grain. From this old trade, Giovanni retained only the ‘noble’ part—letters of credit—which remained part of his business, although the main focus became the management of short-term loans backed by real estate, both small and large.

In this new capacity, Giovanni quickly became the owner of dozens of houses and palaces, which he bought and sold, making significant profits. His skill, intuition, and

sometimes boldness in business made Giovanni the perfect man of his time, a period distinctly lacking in lofty ideals.

However, Giovanni had no shortage of ideas regarding the economic empire he was building: a private bank that could support the numerous ventures he had planned and successfully completed. Beyond acquiring properties from defaulting debtors, Giovanni's strength as a real estate investor lay in his ability to seize the right moment, stepping in with financing and equity stakes in prestigious properties whose owners were short on funds. One such example was the English College palace, into which Giovanni entered with a surety contract that he allowed to mature slowly, making improvements and significant refurbishments that, according to the contract, ultimately allowed him to exercise his right of preemption. At that point, six thousand scudi were enough for him to acquire the entire property, which from then on officially became Palazzo Corsetti.

Among the many real estate operations completed by Giovanni Corsetti, not all went as planned, especially when dealing with the old Roman nobility, which had strong support and resources to save their palaces, used as collateral for hefty but unpaid loans. Giovanni Corsetti, for instance, could not repeat the success of the Collegio Inglese deal with Count Settimio Bischi Bulgarini, who owed the considerable sum of seven thousand gold scudi. Giovanni enforced his rights in court, and the judges ordered Bischi to either pay the debt with accrued interest or hand over the family palace on Via San Tommaso in Parione, bordering the Teatro della Pace on one side and the Church of the Virgin of Piceni on the other, to his creditor Giovanni Corsetti.

When everything seemed to be proceeding in favor of Corsetti, Cardinal Prince Francesco Tiberi intervened, offering to step in as the creditor by reimbursing Bischi's debt, including the interest, and paying 9,687 gold scudi to Giovanni Corsetti in front of Notary Vincenzo Mannucci on Via del Foro Traiano 79. Giovanni accepted the payment and ceded his right of preemption to the cardinal. Giovanni's business acumen was demonstrated by his ability to take a step back when necessary without

feeling defeated. Even in this case, he made a significant profit on a loan that had dragged on for nearly ten years due to the titled debtor.

Upon Giovanni's death, Stanislao Corsetti inherited, along with dozens of houses and shops, a substantial amount of liquid assets, which allowed him to operate in the market without continuing the profitable business his father and ancestors had run. In fact, with Giovanni's death, the Corsetti lineage, keeping with the times, would take new professional paths, mostly in the legal field, like Achille Corsetti, who became a prominent lawyer in the Rome Bar.

Stanislao's already wealthy estate was further bolstered by the passing of his father-in-law, Giuseppe Lezzani, who left a substantial inheritance to his second daughter Donatilla. This included properties such as a palazzo in the Chiavari district (with land) from number 4 to 7; a house at Olmo in Trastevere with ground-level premises; a house on Vicolo del Cinque in Trastevere with a garage and ground-level room on Via del Bologna; a house on Borgo Nuovo at numbers 82 and 83; another house at number 14 on Borgo Vecchio; a palazzo on Via Paola, forming an entire block (this is the current corner building between Via Paola and Corso Vittorio); a shop on Panico at number 69; small shops and homes on Via dei Coronari 122 and 123; a house on Via dei Coronari 94 and 95; a two-story house with shops on Via in Lucina; two small houses on Via Leccosa 4 and 5; a house on Via dei Pontefici 10 and 11; a house on Via Vittoria 73 and 74; a house on Via della Vite 97 and 98; a house at the Temple of Peace with a barn, stable, and garage; a house on Via del Mortorio; and a vineyard at Porta Pia. The list concludes with the specification: "The fees on the houses and vineyard are the responsibility of the current owners." This was certainly not a burdensome responsibility, considering that, beyond these properties, the generous father also left Donatilla a considerable sum, including government bonds from the Monte di Pietà and liquid assets exceeding one hundred thousand gold scudi.

The vineyard at Porta Pia deserves special mention, if only because it indirectly connects the Corsetti and Alvarez de Castro families. Giuseppe Lezzani had purchased the vineyard from Nicola Piccirilli, commander of the Roman military garrison, a few

years after the end of the Napoleonic occupation. Nicola Piccirilli, the father of Carolina, who married noble guard Michele Alvarez de Castro on February 18, 1819, had refused to swear allegiance to Napoleon and was arrested and imprisoned at Castel Sant'Angelo alongside his wife, who had attempted to save him from the guards. At Castel Sant'Angelo, Nicola met brothers Carlo and Michele Alvarez de Castro, also noble guards imprisoned for refusing to swear loyalty to Napoleon. Nicola and Michele were released together in 1813 after Napoleon's fall and the departure of General Miollis from Rome. Carlo, Michele's younger brother, had died three months earlier, succumbing to the harsh conditions in the dungeons of Castel Sant'Angelo.

The long years of imprisonment had drained the Piccirilli family's resources to the point that Nicola was forced to sell the large vineyard at Porta Pia: 25 Roman pieces of land, equivalent to about six hectares densely planted with trees. In addition to countless vines, the appraiser counted: 173 olive trees, 55 peach trees, 10 sugar pears, 3 plum trees, 5 apricot trees, 2 cherry trees, 2 fig trees, 2 laurel trees, 3 pear trees, 35 almond trees, 908 'married' poplars (meaning with climbing vines), 12 elms, 4 mulberry trees, 3 sour cherry trees, 10 walnut trees, and another 1,094 various trees, along with four bamboo groves separating the property from surrounding vineyards. The appraiser valued the vineyard at 800 gold scudi, and Giuseppe Lezzani paid 900. About twenty years later, on September 18, 1840, Donatilla Lezzani and her husband Stanislao Corsetti sold the vineyard to Canon Luigi Fiaschetti for 1,400 scudi. To secure this beautiful vineyard, the buyer, not wanting to risk a higher bid from others, paid 160 more scudi than the appraised value.

The wide availability of cash would suggest greater care for the historic palazzo, but instead, it only saw occasional wall refreshes and layers of wallpaper applied over those already laid by the last Orfini tenants. Stanislao Corsetti, prudent with his spending, contented himself with showcasing the statues and marble pieces from the Podocataro collection, perhaps without fully appreciating their true value. The lack of qualified restoration efforts speaks volumes about the Corsetti family's limited artistic sensitivity. They did everything they could to make the 15th-century palazzo more

‘modern,’ showing little regard for its ancient history. The times of Livio Podocataro and the cultured Orfini were long gone.

As their parents did for them, on November 24, 1856, Stanislao and Donatilla prepared for the marriage of their son Gustavo to Countess Maria Lucernari. Before notary Filippo Bacchetti, in Via di Santa Maria di Campo Marzio 9, the parents of the couple drew up a very detailed marriage contract. The bride’s father endowed his daughter with 15,000 gold scudi plus a full set of furnishings for twelve, while the Corsetti couple endowed their son Gustavo with 27,000 gold scudi plus the palazzo on Via Monserrato, numbered 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, and two other palazzos on Via del Pellegrino, numbered 105, 106, 107, and 108.

Gustavo’s first marriage did not last long. Countess Maria died along with the child she was carrying after a premature birth in 1859. Two years later, on February 1, 1861, the scene repeated itself before the same notary, Bacchetti. This time, the bride was the beautiful neighbor Adele Polverosi, whose family’s palazzo adjoined that of the groom. This time, the bride’s dowry amounted to 17,000 gold scudi, while the groom’s dowry was 50,000 gold scudi, plus the palazzo on Via Monserrato and the two palazzos on Via del Pellegrino. Adele bore Gustavo two daughters, Maria and Olga.

The forty years of Gustavo Corsetti’s ownership of Palazzo Podocataro passed without any particularly disruptive interventions regarding the building. However, as each generation of Corsetti sought to leave their mark on the palazzo, whether for better or worse, Gustavo decided to close the century in the worst possible way. As the marriage of his eldest daughter Maria to noble guard Emilio Alvarez de Castro approached, Gustavo ordered a series of ‘restoration’ works on the palazzo, culminating in its greatest desecration: the bricking up and ruinous elevation of Perin del Vaga’s elegant loggia.

The permit request was filed with the Building Inspectorate on December 12, 1900. After countless delays and demands for additional inspections, with concerned notes from various municipal officials, the long-awaited approval finally arrived on January

9, 1904, from the deputy head of the Building Inspectorate. This effectively sealed the fate of Perin del Vaga's loggia, sacrificed for the wedding of the unfortunate young couple, Maria Corsetti and Emilio Alvarez de Castro. The actual perpetrator of this atrocity was master builder Furio Rosati of Via Monserrato 24—essentially, “the assassin” next door.

Gustavo Corsetti's disastrous decisions were largely influenced by the prevailing trends of the time. For Rome's nobility, caught up in the fever of 'doing' that had entered through Porta Pia with the Bersaglieri thirty years earlier, it seemed obligatory at the end of the 19th century to renovate or rebuild. The prevailing mindset was to “modernize.” To the less discerning, the 'Piedmontese' palazzi along nearby Corso Vittorio made the old look dated. Too often, beauty was sacrificed in favor of functionality, with little taste and a complete disregard for the building's history.

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