

A Garibaldian in the Convent 1942

(*Un garibaldino al convento*)
Vittorio De Sica

OVERVIEW This was De Sica's third feature film as director, and one that completed a trio of comic yet dramatic stories set in institutions. Released during World War II, when Mussolini's fascist government ruled Italy, the film manages to tell a delightful story about young love set in the dramatic context of Italy's wars of unification in the nineteenth century. At the same time, it also satirises social conventions and individual pomposity, with a rich mixture of high jinks and farce. The film's political message is cleverly disguised underneath a thick cloak of nationalism, which the censors of the day would have admired.

SYNOPSIS Caterinetta, who is now an old lady tells her granddaughters a 'beautiful love story' that took place when she and Mariella, were students at a convent. The story then shifts back to the middle of the nineteenth century to a town somewhere in Italy. Caterinetta and Mariella come from different sides of the social divide, and have different personalities, which makes them hostile to each other. Mariella has a secret lover, Count Amidei, who makes fun of the somewhat younger and less attractive Caterinetta. Everything changes when Amidei turns up at the convent, seeking refuge as a wounded soldier of the rebel army. The two girls and Tiepolo, the caretaker, also a rebel supporter, hide him in a shed. When his presence is discovered, the Royalist soldiers invade the convent, surround the shed and start firing. Mariella risks her life by running into the shed to help him and Tiepolo, while Caterinetta races off on a horse and fetches a regiment of rebel soldiers. Just as the Royalists are about to break into the shed, the rebels arrive and rescue Amidei. The film ends by returning to the present, where the elderly Caterinetta tells her granddaughters that Amidei later died in battle and never saw Mariella again. In the final scene, the elderly Mariella enters the room, followed by a similarly aged Gertrude (the gossip at the convent), who proceeds to tell her old friends a salacious story.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Mariella	A young girl in a wealthy family.
Caterinetta	An even younger girl in a plebian family.
Amidei	Young man engaged to Mariella.
Tiepolo	The caretaker at the convent.
Gertrude	The gossip at the convent.

STORY

The present An elderly lady arrives at a grand mansion in a carriage with two of her eight granddaughters. She is Caterinetta and the house belongs to Mariella, her old friend and (it turns out) rival. Entering a sitting room, the young women ask about the painted portraits hanging on the walls. One of them is of Mariella, when she was 'so innocent and sweet,' says Caterinetta caustically. Going out to the balcony, the grandmother looks across the street where she used to live and then the memories come flooding back.

The past It is the middle of the nineteenth century. Blond-haired Mariella and dark-haired Caterinetta eye each other across the street as a group of men on horseback ride by below them. Mariella's wealthy family looks down on Caterinetta's family, who have little money. In a comical scene, one of the men in Caterinetta's family rehearses a political speech, full of pompous rhetoric. Later, in a continuation of this farce, the impeccably delivered speech falls on the deaf ears of 'his excellency' to whom it is addressed. When toasts are exchange, rats and chickens scurry around beneath the long dresses of the ladies, causing chaos. In the pandemonium, chickens jump onto the table and sample the dishes.

Count Amidei When the horse-riders return from a fox-hunt, one of them glances up at Caterinetta, who sticks out her tongue at him. Another horse-rider, Count Amidei, is told by a servant that Mariella has returned to her boarding school in the company of her aunt. As the ladies' carriage rolls through the countryside, Amidei rides up beside it, but Mariella, chaperoned by her aunt, can only wave at him.

Chance encounter Caterinetta and her aunt take a walk in the countryside. Still out riding, Amidei mistakenly shoots at Caterinetta's aunt (who is wearing a hat with fox-like feathers). Amidei apologises, but Caterinetta mocks him, setting off a playful banter between the two. He spansks her, she bites him and he says he'll send her to boarding school.

Convent In the next scene, a pouting Caterinetta does indeed enter a convent school, where Mariella is already a student. As a new member of the school, she must kiss all the other students who are lined up to greet her. When she reaches Mariella, she pecks at her like a hawk.

Tiepolo Caterinetta makes friends with Tiepolo, the convent caretaker, when she uses his shed as a home for her prohibited pet guinea pig, which she brought from home. He, too, is an animal lover, with a secret orchestra of blackbirds, and agrees to hide her pet from the Mother Superior, who hates animals.

Back in town The letters written home by the two girls are mistakenly delivered to the other's family, which brings together Caterinetta's chubby uncle and Mariella's not-so-young mother. The infatuated uncle recites the sonnets he has composed for her, but she leaves the room.

Secrets at the convent When a third girl, named Gertrude, maliciously stokes the enmity between the two girls, Caterinetta attacks Mariella and bites her hand. Caterinetta is punished by forbidding her to speak with any of the other girls. When Caterinetta is caught with a scandalous book (which Mariella was reading), she nobly refuses to implicate Mariella and insists it is hers. But the Mother Superior sees Mariella's name inside the book and summons her. Realising that Caterinetta tried to protect her, Mariella is grateful. Now, the two girls are bound together as friends, though each maintains her prejudice against the other's family.

Wounded Garibaldian Caterinetta finds out that Tiepolo keeps rifles for men who are about to join Garibaldi's army. Meanwhile, the other girls are singing during a church service when gun shots are heard. Caterinetta leaves the storeroom and sees Count Amidei, who is badly wounded. When he says he's one of Garibaldi's men, she hides him in Tiepolo's storeroom where Tiepolo also hides his horse. Amidei needs a doctor, but they can't expose him, so Tiepolo sends Caterinetta to fetch Mariella because she has a nurse's training.

Secret lovers Mariella recognises the wounded soldier as her secret fiancé and is overcome with sympathy. 'She's one of us,' Tiepolo exclaims, not knowing that it is love and rather than politics that she shares with the wounded man. Mariella tends to his wounds and, when the others leave to get hot water and disinfectant, they kiss in private. That night, in the convent dormitory, the two girls pledge their friendship to each other.

A lady and a girl During preparations for the end of school celebration, Mariella fakes a headache and the two girls sneak out to look after Amidei, who is still recovering in the shed. When Caterinetta asks why he addresses her as 'you' and Mariella as 'miss,' he explains that Mariella is a 'lady' while she is only a 'girl.'

Travel troubles Caterinetta's uncle and Mariella's mother both travel to the convent for the closing event. When the wealthy lady's carriage breaks down, the clumsy gentleman offers her a ride in his but she refuses to allow him to accompany her.

Secrets revealed Caterinetta discovers Mariella and Amidei embracing. Worse, the Mother Superior also finds them together. Mariella claims that he is her fiancé and also reveals that he is a Garibaldian. 'A Garibaldian in the convent!', she cries and orders him to leave. Soon the other impure residents of Tiepolo's shed (blackbirds and horse) are discovered and removed. The guests arrive for the celebration and are greeted by the Mother Superior and cheerfully singing girls. Amidei attempts to leave but Tiepolo convinces him to wait until night, when his friends will help him.

Soldiers in the convent Scared of the scandal, and caught in the midst of the celebration, the Mother Superior is unsure what to do. When the royalist soldiers enter the convent looking for Amidei, the Mother Superior says anyone who seeks refuge there is under her protection. She is overruled by the

governor, who is attending the celebration, and the soldiers surround the shed where Amidei is holed up. Mariella manages to get inside, while Caterinetta escapes on a horse.

Rescue The soldiers fire on the shed, and Amidei fires back. Riding through the countryside, Caterinetta finds a company of Garibaldian soldiers and brings them back to the convent. The Garibaldian fighters overpower the more numerous Royalists and Amidei is rescued. Led away to safety, he tells Mariella that they will be reunited soon.

Back to the present Grandmother Caterinetta weeps when she tells her granddaughters that they never saw him again. She shows them Amidei's uniform, with a hole where a bullet hit his chest. Then, Mariella arrives, a grand old lady, wearing a necklace from which hangs a photo of Amidei. In the final scene, Gertrude, the malicious gossip at the convent and now another old woman, is announced and proceeds to tell them all a 'juicy story' about illicit love.

THEMES

1. Friendship One way to view this film is as a study in female friendship. Mariella and Caterinetta grow up as neighbours, separated only by the width of a street, but also by three years in age and by a deep gulf in class. Mariella's family is wealthy, whereas Caterinetta's family boasts an aristocratic heritage. At first, the relationship between the two young girls is defined by this social divide between their families, which generates bickering and mild insults. This changes when the girls are taken out of the family context and meet as students in a convent. Here, too, at first, they sneer at each other, and their enmity is sowed even deeper by the gossipy Gertrude, but eventually they form a strong bond of friendship. The shift occurs when Caterinetta lies to protect Mariella from the anger of the Mother Superior by claiming that the romantic novel in her possession was hers (it actually belonged to Mariella). Mariella is grateful for this act of kindness, but even then the two girls pretend they still dislike each other. Their bond is finally sealed by their shared love/respect for the wounded soldier (Amidei) who takes refuge in the convent. A hiccup occurs when Caterinetta, who had fancied Amidei, discovers that he loves Mariella. But when Amidei is threatened with capture by the Royalist soldiers and Mariella despairs, Caterinetta rises above her jealousy and helps her to save his life. Strengthened by their bond, both girls show tremendous courage in the end. And the film ends when they meet, now as old women and still strong friends.

2. Love In that final scene, Caterinetta says to Mariella that she has been entertaining her granddaughters by telling them a story, 'a beautiful love story.' And the film does present a tender, and tragic, romance between Mariella and Amidei. The young Mariella is an angel of a girl, with perfect features and golden hair. She is admired by the dashing young Amidei, who first appears on horseback in a fox hunt. This being the mid-nineteenth century, however, the lovers cannot meet in public. Before he takes refuge in the convent, their contact is limited to glances from a balcony and the window of a carriage. Mariella is sent away to boarding school, it seems, in order to forestall any further romance with him (or any another man). The next time they meet, it is in Tiepolo's shed, when Mariella tends to his wounds. He raises himself up to kiss her, but she speaks to him as if she doesn't know him: 'Don't move or speak, sir. You'll tire yourself out.' She later acknowledges him as her lover and risks her own life when she runs into the shed surrounded by Royalist soldiers. Inside, she fights by his side and rejoices when he is saved by the Garibaldian soldiers. Then comes the sad parting, the two lovers clinging on and pledging never to be apart, as he rides away with his comrades. Their love never dies, though he does not survive.

3. Loyalty A significant element in the film is loyalty. The first example is the devotion shown by Caterinetta toward Mariella in the incident of the scandalous novel found in the former's possession. This display of allegiance is what changes the whole dynamic of the film and initiates the bond between the two girls. Even more prominent is allegiance to the cause of freedom, represented by Garibaldi's movement. When Tiepolo, who is a loyal supporter, proclaims that Mariella is 'one of us', he mistakes her romantic attachment for political loyalty. Later, when Caterinetta summons the Garibaldian soldiers, she also declares to the commander that she is 'one of yours.' A similar loyalty to the liberation of Italy is what motivates Amidei and Tiepolo, who together sing a patriotic song at the moment when they are about to be killed by the Royalists. In the foreground of that scene, De Sica, has placed a bust of the Virgin Mary, suggesting that the Garibaldi movement is faithful to Catholicism. The cry of 'a Garibaldian in the convent', which expresses the nuns' fear of desecration, is thus reversed and made to signify the radicals' religious faith.

4. *Loss* In this very early film, the theme of loss is found more in the storytelling technique than in the story itself. While the plot centres on a love triangle, involving two young convent girls and a soldier, it is told by one of those girls, Caterinetta, when she is an old lady. Introducing her tale to her granddaughters, she describes it 'as a beautiful love story.' Thus, the entire film is suffused with the remembrance of love, the recollection of tender feelings that were frustrated and ended in tragedy for the soldier and for the other girl whom he loved. The old lady, who also loved the soldier but was not his choice, weeps at the end when she tells her granddaughters that the soldier died before he could marry his fiancé, the other girl. Everything is made material when she shows them the soldier's uniform, with the hole made by the lethal bullet. The film ends when the fiancé, Mariella, now also a grandmother, enters the room and joins Caterinetta. Two old ladies can now reminisce about the loss of love in their past.

5. *Politics* Lurking within this melodramatic historical comedy is a serious political message. De Sica made the film when Mussolini's fascist government was protecting Italy from the foreigners, which meant that the censors were pleased by the generous helpings of Italian nationalism on display. However, the hero is a radical, an underground rebel who fights with a renegade army against the official government of the day. By placing the story in the context of the wars for Italian freedom from French domination, De Sica is able to express support for resistance to oppressive political authority (i.e., Mussolini). The entire last quarter of the film shows the Garibaldian movement in a positive light while undermining the credibility of the Royalists. When the Royalist soldiers enter the convent, the Mother Superior objects to such an intrusion. We also wonder why a hundred men are needed to capture a single, wounded man, a question that is asked by the visiting government dignitary at the school graduation. That same Royalist politician is also shown to be hypocritical when he actually congratulates the commander of the Garibaldian soldiers on his excellent performance in rescuing Amidei. Finally, we are treated to a rousing rendition of the Garibaldian movement's song ('Brothers of Italy, Italy has awoken...') sung by Tiepolo and Amidei. Much like the hero hidden in shed, the film's message of resistance is cleverly wound into the love story and silly goings-on at a girls' boarding school.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Caterinetta Of the three main characters, Caterinetta is the most important and the most complex. She is a young girl (14 or 15), not particularly attractive, but full of spirit. She is a bit of a rebel, loves animals and defies the convent rules by hiding her pet guinea pig in the caretaker's shed. At the convent, she does not dedicate herself to studying, but later we see that she has a 'heart of gold,' as one of the convent sisters says.

Spirited The spunky side of Caterinetta is on display from the very beginning, when, for example, she sticks her tongue out at a man who looks up at her on the balcony. A more extended illustration is the scene in the countryside when Amidei mistakes her aunt for a fox and shoots at her. When Amidei apologises, Caterinetta makes fun of him, prompting her to address her as a 'girl.' She draws herself up and declares that she 'is not a girl. And I won't allow you to talk to me in such a manner.' He laughs at her impudence, but she warns him that she can 'be a lot worse.' And, finally, when he gives her a light spanking, she bites him hard. Spirited, spunky and proud, Caterinetta is a not a person to trifled with.

Loyal Although she can be spiteful and petty, Caterinetta also shows loyalty, especially to her rival Mariella. The situation is that she has been caught with a book (a romantic novel that belonged to Mariella) and hauled up before the Mother Superior. When she is upbraided for having such a scandalous book, she refuses to divulge whose it is. The 'only way to avoid a severe punishment', she is told, is to confess. Again and again, the head nun demands an answer, but Caterinetta will not betray Mariella. She might not like the girl from the wealthy family, but she will not snitch on a fellow student.

Brave Although Caterinetta is quite young, perhaps fourteen or fifteen, she is extremely brave. This quality is displayed in minor ways throughout and in grand fashion at the end. After the Royalist soldiers have surrounded the shed in which Amidei is hiding, everything appears lost. Mariella feels powerless to help him, but Caterinetta does not despair. Escaping from the grip of two soldiers, she jumps on a horse, races out of the convent and into the countryside, where she locates a regiment of Garibaldian soldiers. Those soldiers then rescue Amidei, the Royalists are driven from the convent,

Mariella is (briefly) reunited with her fiancé and the desperate situation is recovered. All because a young girl had the courage to act.

Mariella If Caterinetta is spunky and rebellious, Mariella, who is three years older, is her opposite. Whereas Caterinetta comes from a plebian family and has freckles, the lovely Mariella is born into a wealthy family. Caterinetta is emotional and impulsive, but Mariella she is composed and dignified. She is also resourceful and loyal to her fiancé.

Dignified We have few sightings of Mariella until the frantic ending of the story, but one that illustrates her character occurs when she is on her way to boarding school. She is riding in a carriage, accompanied by her mother. Her mother falls asleep. When the carriage passes a group of mounted huntsmen, Mariella peers out of the back window, hoping to see Amidei, her secret fiancé. Her crestfallen face expresses her disappointment. Then she does spot him and her face brightens, but she holds a finger to her lips, telling him to remain silent. She does not want her mother to know. The carriage rolls past him. She does not speak. Instead, she waves a handkerchief out of the window as a sign of her love. Mariella is a composed and dignified young lady.

Courageous There is one moment, however, when Mariella throws caution to the wind and acts recklessly, out of love for Amidei. The Royalists soldiers have surrounded the shed where her lover is holed up with Tiepolo. Mariella and Caterinetta are watching from inside a convent building. Suddenly, in tears, Mariella decides to go to him. Caterinetta tells her it's dangerous and tries to restrain her, but Mariella is determined. 'I can't leave him alone,' she cries and runs across the courtyard, dodging the soldiers, and enters the shed. A hail of bullets follows her, but she is happy to embrace him. In dashing past the armed soldiers and throwing her lot in with the rebel Amidei, Mariella has cast aside all her upbringing as a young woman in a politically conservative family.

Count Amidei Amidei is the male hero of the story. He is a member of the upper class, who falls in love with Mariella, but he later emerges as a member of the Garibaldian movement. He is a likable young man, fun-loving and manly, but his defining characteristic is his commitment to the unification of his country.

Playful Amidei has a light-hearted side to his character. This is illustrated in his first speaking scene, when he has to apologise to Caterinetta's aunt for accidentally shooting at her. Referring to the aunt's ludicrous hat, he laughs and says, 'I didn't realise that women these days walk around with birds on their heads.' When Caterinetta mocks him, he responds by giving her a light spanking. It is a brief scene, which ends with Amidei nursing a finger bitten by 'the viper,' but it displays his geniality.

Patriotic Any young man can be playful, especially with young girls, but Amidei has a much more serious character. He is, despite his high social status, a political radical and member of the Garibaldian movement, which fought against Austrian and French armies and unified Italy in the mid-nineteenth century. The most explicit illustration of his commitment to the cause of Italian freedom occurs at the very end of the story, when he, accompanied by Tiepolo and Mariella, is surrounded by Royalist soldiers. They have barricaded the door to the shed, but the soldiers are about to break through and capture them. Bullets crash through the windows and all seems lost. At that desperate moment, he and Tiepolo break out in singing the anthem of the rebel movement, calling on the 'brothers of Italy' to fight back. The song refers to Scipio, a Roman general who defeated Carthage, thus infusing the moment with patriotism from ancient times.



(Caterinetta, left, and Mariella at the convent)



(from left to right: Amidei, Mariella, Tiepolo and Caterinetta in the shed)