

THE LAST JUDGEMENT

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Historical background

In the second half of the 15th Century the Dutch artist Hans Memling painted in Bruges a famous triptych the “Last Judgement”, whose donors were an Italian aristocrat Angelo Tani and his wife Caterina. The painting never got into the hands of its donors. Due to military hostilities between England and the Hanseatic League, the galley carrying the triptych to Florence was captured in 1473 by a caravel under Paul Benecke’s command and taken to Danzing. The ship and all precious cargo were the property of the Florentine family of Medici and of their agent in Bruges, Tommaso Portinari. After the capture, there followed long, unending legal proceedings, in which almost all of contemporary Europe got involved, among others the Burgundian ruler Charles the Bold; the Austrian Archduke Maximilian; Cosimo, Piero and Lorenzo Medici; and Pope Sixtus IV.

The action of the film (and series) covers the period between 1464-1492. The events take place mainly in Florence, Bruges and Danzig, and to a lesser degree in London – all European cities. In Florence, ruled by the Medici, the Renaissance is flourishing, whereas in the other three cities the Middle Ages is slowly coming to an end. The wave of the Reformation is just about to sweep over Europe. In the film two wars are mentioned which will influence the characters lives and the fate of the triptych: the war between England and the Hanseatic League (1471-1473) and the War of the Roses (1455-1485).

General remarks

The spirit of that time, which is to pervade the whole film, is the spirit of passion and extreme emotions. The characters in the film are possessed by the “Last Judgement”, a work which continually evades their grasp and has its own existence. Violence and fear, hatred and love, sensuality and the genius of a true artist converge in the famous triptych, thus constituting the work’s imperishable value – and yet it has something more, something that is almost alluring in that painting – a pervasive, almost imperceptible mystery.

We would like to have our film project perceived on the three levels. The first level is the sensational (Aleida’s assassination, capturing the ship with Memling’s painting); the second is the psychological, the story of man’s passions, of love and hatred, of passion and unfulfilled ambitions; and finally the third level, the metaphysical, suggested, among other things, by the mystery of the triptych, the influence of the painting on the character’s fates, and on the strife of the artist searching for truth, wishing – through the medium of his talent – “to mete out justice to the visible world”.

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

ELIZABETH

She is the main character of the film. Her characterisation exists only in Polish version.

HANS MEMLING (1435-1494)

A painter of German descent, the pupil of Roger Van der Weyden. One of the most outstanding artists of his times, the creator of the “Last Judgement”. Honest, sensitive, he always wants to follow his own conscience. It seems to him that he is capable of discriminating between the true and the false, but little by little he himself falls prey to the lies of other people. When towards the end of his life he notices his mistakes, he decides to take a drastic step to save whatever can still be saved.

ANGELO TANI (1416-1492)

Italian aristocrat, till 1465 a representative of the Medici bank in Bruges. Loyal, straightforward, responsible in his work, not inclined to take risks. Donor of the “Last Judgement”, a painting which, by constituting a “living” proof of his faith in God’s divine justice, is to compensate the wrongs he has suffered on earth. For the sake of triptych he is prepared to face any humiliation, to sacrifice his honour. A victim of intrigues perpetrated by his younger rival, Tommaso Portinari.

TOMMASO PORTINARI (1428-1501)

Comes from a famous Italian family. Till 1465 – an assistant to Tani in the bank in Bruges, and then his successor. First adviser of Duke Charles the Bold, the ruler of Burgundy. Intelligent, cunning, active in business, a Maecenas, likes being surrounded with luxury. He loves manipulating people, an example of which is the intrigue surrounding the “Last Judgement”. With constant loans he supports the venturesome campaigns of Duke Charles, thus making the Duke

dependent on him. This telling strategy will, at some point turn against Portinari, who will be trapped in his own web.

CATERINA TANAGLIA (1448-1492)

Angelo Tani's wife, co-donor of the "Last Judgement". More than 30 years younger than her husband. Frank, noble, emotional, not easily made distraught. Caterina's strong personality makes her a spiritual mainstay for Tani. She is the cause of moral perplexity for Memling, who is fascinated by her.

ANNA GOES

Tani's mistress from the period before his marriage with Caterina. Voluptuous, impulsive, ready to sacrifice in the name of love. Madly in love with Tani. Having lost him, she lives only with illusions. The story of her love and madness best illustrates certain basic medieval morals, showing at the same time the psyche of a contemporary woman of her time.

PAUL BENECKE

Dutch privateer in the service of Danzig. Commander of the caravel which captured Portinari's ship "St. Matthew" with Memling's triptych on board. A persecutor and a victim. A seaman with tremendous push, self-confident, enjoying the respect of his subordinates and the complete confidence of ship owners. The "Last Judgement" confronts him unexpectedly with a serious crime which he committed years before, and becomes the beginning of the end of his career. In the "duel" between Benecke and the painting, which is an echo of the duel between Benecke and Memling, all the mysticism and metaphysics of the film are reflected.

TREATMENT

Bruges, 1464. A representative of the Lancaster – a family caught up in a power struggle with the family of York to determine who will rule the Islands – arrives from England at the branch bank of the Medici – an Italian family from Florence. The matter concerns a substantial loan, with the director of the bank, Angelo Tani, settling quickly and favourably, since he has been on very good terms with the Lancasters for years. Tani's decision is sharply criticized by his assistant, Tommaso Portinari, who unexpectedly arrives at the house of his superior when Anna is there. Anna, the daughter of a rich merchant from Bruges, is in love with Tani. Tani, surprised by the visit, hides the girl in the other wing of the house because the work contract into which he entered with Cosimo Medici, forbids him, among other things, to receive women in his house. Tani cannot trust his assistant, as he knows that this ambitious man, younger than himself, dreams becoming manager of the bank in Bruges as soon as possible. This leads to frequent conflicts between them.

This night Portinari attacks with double force. He thinks that the money lent to the Lancasters will not bring profits that, for example, chartering a big ship would bring. He is surprised that the English did not ask for a loan from the London bank of the Medici. Probably the money is meant to financially aid small rival banks, something which was forbidden by Cosimo Medici. Tani assures him that although profit from the loan granted to the Lancasters will not be as high as in the case of chartering a ship, it is much safer. He knows nothing about help for small banks. The argument is growing hot when the irritated Portinari happens to come up to the window and see the faint shadow of a girl from the other wing of the house. It is not until now that he associated this apparition with several pieces of woman's clothing in Tani's room. Suddenly he changes the tone of their conversation, smiles mysteriously, and as if reconciled to defeat, appears convinced by the arguments of his superior, and leaves the room.

After Portinari's exit, Tani goes to the room where he has hidden Anna. He brings the clothes which she left in his room and tells her to get dressed quickly. He scolds her for being so incautious. He had noticed her in the window, having followed Portinari's glance. Anna does not understand his grudge against her; she does not know why she should hide from people. The lovers quarrel fiercely, and Anna tells Tani that she will never see him again.

Meanwhile, before leaving for England, the Lancaster's messenger, Sir John Vale, visits the studio of a famous Flemish master, Roger Van der Weyden, to order his portrait. Since the master is busy, Sir John must wait. The garrulous Englishman tells the painter's pupils what his portrait should be like. It should depict – if they were to follow his contradicting and ridiculous suggestions, which prove that he is a dilettante – a ridiculous man. Some of the pupils begin to sketch his caricature. From the far end of the corridor appears the master accompanied by an elderly gentleman and a beautiful young girl named Aleida. It is obvious that the painter is fascinated by her beauty and that she, too, is thrilled by this encounter. After the first guests have left, Sir John comes up to the painter. Paying homage to his art, he says that he expected the master to be much older. The painter explains this misunderstanding. Van der Weyden has been dead for some months and his name is Hans Memling; he is master Roger's former pupil. The astonished Englishman backs away from the idea of ordering the painting. Leaving the studio, he sees his finished antiportrait. One of the pupils has hastily painted over Sir John's caricature, and suddenly a surprising composition resembling modern abstract painting appears on the canvas. Memling looks at the painting as if he were discovering in it new possibilities. He hesitates momentarily and then rejects it.

Florence. Before the contract for his work in Bruges is renewed, Angelo Tani is summoned to talk with the most important person in the Medici family, Cosimo Medici, the prince and ruler of Florence. Their conversation is unpleasant one. Tani is accused of betraying the bank's interests, proof of which is the loan to the Lancasters who are fronts for rival banks. Tani defends himself claiming that this particular deal has nothing to do with other banks, since the Lancasters need this money to suppress the House of York. What is worse, attacks Cosimo Medici, is that in case of Lancaster's defeat the loan may never be returned to the bank. When Tani is convinced that he will be dismissed from his job, the prince informs him that he will renew his contract. First, because he does not like the Portinari and second, because the economic council pleaded for Tani – most of all Francesco Tanaglia, who appreciated the honesty and caution of the present manager of the bank in carrying out transactions.

Several days after talking with the prince, Angelo Tani decides to visit the Tanaglia to thank them for supporting him. Francesco accepts his gratitude and invites Tani to a family dinner. At the table the guest is seated between the host and his daughter Caterina. Angelo and Caterina fall in love at first sight. The congenial family atmosphere is interrupted by a sudden news of Cosimo Medici's death. People keep rushing in and out of the Tanaglia home; some ask Francesco for advice. There are speculations as to how authority will be executed by Piero Medici, the prince's son. Some people expect that his rule will not last long since he is in poor health. It appears then that it is the younger

brother, Lorenzo's favours that should be curried. Piero is not dangerous; for the future is not his. These speculations prove to be wrong. Piero Medici soon becomes a terror to all the debtors. He victimizes Francesco Tanaglia: Francesco must pay back all his debts in a short time. Tani comes to his help offering a loan. Now he becomes almost a member of the Tanaglia family. He spends wonderful moments with Caterina. He is still waiting for decision to return to Bruges. Expecting that it may come at any moment, Angelo and Caterina get engaged. Soon after this, Tani is called to come to the Medici's palace. The new ruler of Florence tells him that he has voided the contract signed by his father and dismissed Tani from his post as manager of the bank in Bruges. Piero Medici gives two reasons: one was known earlier – the Lancaster's case – and the other is the unexpected presence of Anna in Angelo's house. It becomes obvious that the intrigue is Portinari's doing.

There is one more reason, not mentioned by Medici. Tommaso Portinari has gained the confidence of the Duke of Burgundy, Charles the Bold, and has become his political counselor. Piero Medici wants to take advantage of it for his own purpose. That is why Tani's place must be taken by his assistant. Angelo sees it as his professional and personal failure. He expects further of his degradation. He is afraid that the Tanaglia will return away from him. He does not know what Caterina's reaction will be when she learns that one of the reasons for his losing the job was a woman.

1465. Despite her family's objections, Caterina, in love with Tani, goes ahead with her marriage. Shortly afterward Tani must leave for a long trip to Bruges to pass on his post to Portinari, and then go to London where he is to use all his influences to save the London branch bank of Medici from bankruptcy.

A small port near Bruges. At the wharf are several boats from which barrels are hastily unloaded. Far up the river another boat appears; the oarsmen are rowing hard. People ashore notice new rivals: they throw the last barrels onto carts, harness the horses and quickly leave. The oarsmen dock the boat, but now there is only one cart left, and with a broken wheel. The situation seems hopeless. When a peasant's cart appears near by, the men waste no time. They seize the horse, its beaten owner unable to protest. The oldest of the three oarsmen, a man in his thirties called by his mates Paul, mounts the horse in great haste, takes the smallest of the barrels and sets off. Pretty soon he is not far behind the competitor's carts, but he does not follow them. He turns to the fields and gallops across the country.

Residence of Duke Charles the Bold. The ruler of Burgundy is receiving people who have complaints to lodge. An old, poorly dressed man complains about the wickedness of soldiers. All of a sudden the door bursts open, a cook rushes in

with a large plate in hand and stops before his master. He announces sensational news: first herring this year! The duke takes a herring from the plate, and holding it above his head slowly drops it into his mouth. Ecstasy is on the ruler's face, with much smacking of lips. When asked where this unexpected gift has come from, the cook points in the direction of the door, where we can see the oarsman humbly standing. Asked by the duke, he introduces himself as Paul Benecke. Charles the Bold orders that he be rewarded. The same day Paul Benecke and his two partners meet at an inn to drink to their success. At the same time, a party celebrating Portinari's promotion is in a full swing; and at Memling's house, only a few streets away, arrives several friends whom the painter has invited to dinner – during which they will get a surprise promised by the painter.

At Portinari's reception, among other guests Anna Goes is present with her family. It is clear from the conversation held by the guests behind the host's back that Angelo Tani was much more popular and better liked by the citizens of Bruges than Portinari. The latter is trying hard to win Anna, but she firmly rejects the advances of this new manager of the Medici bank. When she says she still loves Tani, Portinari gleefully informs her that his predecessor recently married Caterina Tanagli in Florence. Anna gives way to despair but does not let it show. She says she will believe the news only when she hears it from Angelo himself.

During the dinner at Memling's, his guests insist on his disclosing the surprise. Finally the painter partially gives in. He says that in a moment the woman of his life is to come his fiancée – and his wife in the near future. However, he does not tell her name. The guests are even more curious, now that the secret has been partially unveiled.

While Memling is telling about his fiancée, Aleida (the fiancée) is preparing to go out. For a long time she tries on dresses in front of the mirror. Finally she chooses the dress in which her beloved saw her for the first time. She leaves her house just before dawn. Almost simultaneously, Anna leaves Portinari's reception, and drunken Paul Benecke and his two cronies stagger out of the inn looking for lusty adventures. Soon the paths of these characters will inevitably cross.

Everything will be ordained by chance: Anna will choose the longer way home because she wants to compose herself after the news about Tani's marriage; Aleida, hurrying to meet her beloved, will choose the shorter way along the canal. And it will be she who will arrive before Anna does at the spot where the three seamen are on the lookout for a victim. While the entranced Hans Memling is telling about the beauty and unusual sensitivity of his beloved,

Aleida is attacked by the three assailants, who first rape her and then murder her. Soon Anna appears on the spot where the murder has been committed. Her screams alarm the town guards who immediately set off in pursuit of Aleida's murderers. Two of them are quickly caught. The third one, Paul Benecke, hides on board of one of the ships sailing off to Danzig. In his hand he clenches a precious cross stripped off the victim who desperately tried to defend herself. When, after the ship has set sail, he is discovered by Danzig seaman Jan of Malbork, Benecke promises him big money to help him escape. To prove that he is not poor he shows him the cross taken from Aleida. After considering, Jan agrees to help him.

Hans Memling gives way to despair after the death of his beloved. He locks himself up in his studio and does not let anybody in.

In such a moment Angelo Tani arrives in Bruges. First he goes to the bank, where he has a vicious row with Portinari. Tani is embittered seeing that even the employees who used to be on his side are now against him. A dramatic meeting with Anna only deepens his sense of injustice. The girl curses him, then begs him to return to her, then cries – and laughs hysterically. When Tani openly says that he loves Caterina, Anna shouts that she has been deceived by a despicable man.

Night. A storm wakes up Tani from frightful dreams and nightmares. He goes out into the rain to calm down after what happened the day before. Bells are tolling, the lightning is flashing. In front of the house he meets a strange man who says "Michael" is tolling. Michael is the name of the loudest bell in town, which "Chases away heavy clouds and reminds people to do penance". He quotes verbatim an inscription on the bell about the last judgement. When Tani wants to ask him where he knows this inscription from, the stranger silently leaves.

This unusual encounter gives Tani the idea to commission a painting whose subject would be the Last Judgement. The painting would be a kind of testament, a material testimony to his suffering, and an expression of faith in the existence of a cosmic justice. With this in mind he goes to Memling, who is known to be as Van der Weyden's best pupil. Unfortunately, the other pupils inform him that after the death of his fiancée Memling not only does not paint but does not speak to anybody. It is not until the day when two murderers of Aleida are executed that he goes out of the house. The spectacle is exceptionally cruel and the citizens demand more sophisticated and cruel tortures. This evening Memling comes unexpectedly to the house where Tani is staying. He knows from his pupils that the Italian wants to commission a painting of the "Last Judgement". To Tani's surprise the painter agrees to do it. It is only when

he has left that Angelo realizes Memling is the man he met during the night storm. Straight from Tani's the painter goes to the place of execution, where the murderers' corpses are contorted in torment. Memling sits opposite and starts drawing their faces. With his work he would like to "mete out justice to the visible world", tantamount to getting revenge on Aleida's murderers.

Before leaving for London Tani visits Memling several times. Their emotional states are similar. Soon their common bond is not only the painting, it is something more – friendship. Having paid in advance, Tani sails to Bruges. Anna, with an expressionless face, stands on shore.

Feeling self-assured in this situation, Portinari invites Anna to his house. The girl accepts. She is unnaturally calm as if nothing had happened. She rejects any possibility of emotional involvement – she knows she will never love anybody. However, she allows Portinari to make love with her – during which time she is spiritually absent. Portinari feeling that his asculinity has been insulted, takes it as a humiliation, although in fact it is only the beginning of Anna's insanity.

Meanwhile, Hans Memling regains his balance as a result of Tani's commission. He devotes all his time to work on the "Last Judgement". Faces for the picture are taken from life, from surrounding world. Memling tries to answer the question who, from among the people known to him, should be on the side of saved and who on the side of the damned. He watches people in situations in which their true faces are disclosed. He sketches the faces of murderers during torture; then, during public executions; and the faces of the gathered public. He finds in them hatred and excitement, bumptiousness and humility, vindictive satisfaction and animal fear. The earthly judgement and the last, God's judgement, seem to be identical.

Danzig. Paul Benecke is trying to get rid of the cross ripped off Aleida's neck. At the first opportunity he tries to sell it to a Jewish dealer merchant. The Jew takes the cross in his hand, looks at it with interest, then suddenly gives it back and runs away horrified. Jan of Malbork, who witness it, is as surprised as Benecke is by the merchant's behaviour. Almost at the same moment they are attacked by three Danzig bandits. During a desperate fight Benecke saves the life of Jan of Malbork, paying him back his debt for helping him to escape from Bruges. Thanks to his friendship with Jan, Benecke gets a job on board a ship. Soon becomes one of the best privateers in the town's services. His ability to command people, to gain their confidence, his resolutness and push are admired by three Danzig patricians, who put him in charge of the caravel "Peter of Danzig". Nobody knows his freatest secret – his part in raping and murdering Aleida. The only "witness" of the crime is the cross ripped off the girl's neck.

London. Angelo Tani's stay in London, his saving the Medici branch bank from bankruptcy, are his new chance. The War of the Roses has lasted for ages. The Medici try to be neutral, but Tani as early as before 1460 got involved financially on the side of the then ruling Lancasters. Now, that Edward IV from the house of York is ruling over England, the situation is not favorable. During his stay in London, Tani at first has no luck, but with time, owing to trade with alum imported from Italy, the bank of Medici regains balance and part of its former income level.

In Bruges, meanwhile, the conflict between Portinari and Memling is growing. The banker's prejudice is caused by the news that his enemy has commissioned an expensive painting which may become an embellishment of Florentine churches. Ever since then Portinari tries to deprecate Memling's art. He spreads a rumour that his paintings are not originals but take their origin from ideas stolen from Van der Weyden – ideas, which the old master was not able to realize because of his premature death. This intrigue makes Tani's wrong appear more credible in Memling's eyes. Together with other artists, Memling decorates the town Bruges is preparing for the wedding ceremony of Charles the Bold and Maria of the house of York. When the painter sees how Portinari treats people, lords it over everyone, he decides to put him in his painting in such a way as to show the truth about his conflict with Tani.

1470. In England, after nine years of the rule of the Yorks, the Lancasters come to power. Henry VI becomes king. It seems that Tani's connections with the house presently ruling in England will quickly begin to pay. The rank and position of the bank of Medici in London are to improve significantly, since the Lancasters promised to pay back their debts in a short time. Tani's dreams of a triumphant return to Florence seem to be real. The day when Angelo goes to a reception at Sir John Vale's palace is a turning point in his career. It is on this day that a substantial part of the Lancasters' wealth is to be transferred to Tani for deposit. But the scene Tani sees more and more clearly as he approaches the Englishman's residence is like a nightmare. The palace, besieged by the army of Edward IV of York, is on fire. A horrible fight between unequal forces. The whole family of Sir John along with his servants are killed.

The Lancasters' wealth is looted. Tani and his retinue barely escape. On their return to London a shock awaits them: the news that House of York has brutally quashed its political enemy, and that king Henry VI has been arrested and put in gaol. Edward IV ascends the throne again. This means the decline of Medici bank and Tani's bankruptcy.

At the same time Portinari's prestige and wealth are growing. By constant loans he makes the ruler of Burgundy, Duke Charles the Bold, dependent on him. The

Italian, enjoying a full life, is said to spend more time at the magnate's court than at his bank. He also travels as a diplomat in the services of the Medici and Duke Charles. In 1469 he marries a 14-years-old Italian girl, Maria Bandini Baroncelli. When a year later Angelo Tani, beaten and financially broken, arrives in Bruges, Portinari is at the height of his success. Tani directs his first steps to Memling's studio. He is full of admiration for the painting, as yet not completed. The "Last Judgement" will consist of three parts. The most important – the middle one – is almost ready. In the central part of the painting, on the scales held by Michelangelo, are the figures of Tani and Portinari. The former is on the good side, the latter on the evil, a dichotomy intended to reflect the truth about the conflict. Tani is profoundly moved by it. Although nothing has been suggested by Tani, Memling – as if reading the donor's mind – depicted the archetypal rivals in such a way as was dreamt of by Angelo.

According to the agreement, before leaving for Florence Tani should give the painter the rest of the due money. Considering his present situation, it is much money. Tani decides to borrow money from his old friends. He is faced with great disappointment. Nobody wants to lend it to him. Many of his friends slam the doors in his face. At first Tani thinks their refusal are connected with his misfortune in London. Later on it turns out that to his inability in paying back the debt Anna's case is added. Tani is blamed for the girl's insanity. Her influential family cannot forgive him. In this situation Tani, desperate, not seeing any way out, asks Portinari for help. He comes to his house on the day of a great reception in honour of Duke Charles the Bold. Portinari does not want to lend him the money. At the same time, he takes advantage of the situation to ridicule his rival. He tells him to amuse his guests in the guise of a jester, in return for which he will let him keep any money he may get. The desperate Tani, jester's cap on his head, recklessly tries to cope with the task, but he is only pathetic. Nobody except Anna laughs, and she reacts in a sick, spasmodic way. The pleased Portinari throws a handful of coins at Tani's feet. Tani does not even bother to pick them up. He runs out of the palace, hounded by the invectives and sneers of the guests.

When it seems that he will have to leave Bruges without paying for the painting, which would practically mean giving up the picture – a woman with a masked face comes unexpectedly to the room he has rented. She unveils her face; it is Anna. The infatuated woman brings him to needed money. At first Tani refuses to accept it, but Anna does not even wait for his decision. She leaves the money and laughs hysterically leaving the room. Tani comes to Memling's studio for the last time before leaving Florence. The "Last Judgement" is almost ready. What is missing is the face of the donor's wife – Caterina. Tani promises to send a sketch made by an Italian artist. At the very bottom, among the people cast into the abyss of hell is another mysterious figure without a face, but the painter

does not want to talk about it. Anna's money is not enough. Tani promises to send the rest immediately after return to Florence. In the end he requests that already completed figure of a woman looking at the scales with Portinari and Tani be given the face of Anna. Of Anna, who in her blindness does not see who is really good and who is evil. Memling agrees.

After Tani's departure, Memling triptych becomes more and more famous. Originating from Memling's studio, various – often contradictory – information about the painting is spread. The most sensational piece information concerns the scales: Portinari, one of the best known persons in Bruges, on the side of the damned! People are surprised at the artist's nonconformity and courage. Gossip about the painting also reaches Portinari, who bribes one of the pupil and enters the studio at night. On seeing the picture his first impulse is to destroy it – but the pupils prevents it at the last moment.

On the following day Portinari decides to visit Memling. He gives up an idea of any threat, blackmail, or hostile confrontation. He chooses a totally different strategy: he will try to show the painter his mistake. First he gets hold "proofs" against Tani. The main "proof" is Ann's insanity. He finds witnesses who confirm that Tani promised to marry the girl only in order to seduce her, which caused the girl's illness. Portinari also shows a letter from the bishop of Bruges, in which he is granted a plenary indulgence. The Italian banker assures Memling that he has changed his mode of life and that he suffers because of the mistakes of the past. The artist, though, is still suspicious. All of a sudden everything changes. Tani's attempts to obtain money for the triptych assume unexpected proportions. It becomes a swindle instead. It is brought to light that Anna stole from her house several precious objects which she then sold dirt-cheap. Harassed by interrogations, she finally admits that it was Angelo Tani who forced her to do it. Later she recants but the gossip has already spread, reaching also Memling. The power of the gossip is so great that everybody believes it. Perhaps influenced by it, or maybe because Portinari turns out to be a steadfast Maecenas, the painter visits the rich banker and admits that he has been wrong. He promises to correct his error – the "Last Judgement" will be repainted. Portinari is delighted. As a token of peace he commissions a painting representing the Passion of Christ.

Despite the promise given to the Italian banker, the artist does not correct the triptych at once. He hesitates; he does not want to be disloyal to the donor of the painting. He begins work on the new commission. Meanwhile, Tani's wife, Caterina, arrives in Bruges unexpectedly. She comes with her uncle – a priest, who is to work for the Italian community in this town. The purpose of her visit is to sit for one of the wings of the triptych, its outside, where it was customary to paint the figures of the donors. Angelo's figure was already on the other wing.

Caterina's arrival at his studio surprises Memling. The woman impresses him. Soon the painter stops work on the "Passion of Christ" and starts painting the picture of Tani's wife. To his own surprise he falls in love with her, but Caterina is unapproachable despite the sympathy she has for Memling. However, the gossip about Angelo and Anna is stronger than facts negating it. It will also reach Caterina, for whom it will be a shock. Before leaving Bruges, she goes to the painter's house for the last time. They make love. After Caterina has left, Memling is inconsolable, but even more is he perplexed; he is haunted by remorse. It is then that he adds another figure to his painting: that of a man pulled from one side by a devil, and from the other – by an angel. The figure will have the face of Memling himself. A girl with long, beautiful hair, sitting on a tombstone, is turning her head to him: her face has the features of the murdered Aleida.

The conflict between the Hanseatic League and England continues. Paul Benecke's caravel stands out; Benecke is said to be ruthless, pursuing his end at any cost. During the blockade of the English coast he finds a pretext to capture a ship called "Lord Major of London" and take it to Danzig. Benecke is nicknamed the "brutal sea bird". Memling, taking advantage of Portinari's influence, takes steps to have the only remaining murderer of Aleida brought to court. However, the popular and important that Benecke becomes in Danzig, the less possible it becomes.

Now Memling is working on two paintings: "The Passion of Christ" and the "Last Judgement". Both rivals intend them for the church of Santa Maria Nova in Florence. However, the artist devotes more and more time to the former. He must return to Anna's family the anticipation which he got from Tani when he saw him last. Memling finishes the "Passion of Christ". Portinari pays not only for this painting, but also gives him the rest of the money for the "Last Judgement" – the sum which Tani was not able to pay. At the same time he pays off the losses that Memling suffered by returning the money to Anna's family. This eventually convinces the painter of Portinari's magnanimity, all the more so as he does not claim his right to own the painting. Finally, Memling paints him on the good side of the scales, and Tani on the evil side. In this way he tries to hush the voice of his conscience after his romance with Caterina. He believes that Tani will be condemned. He is trying to persuade himself that any wickedness done to an evil man is negligible.

Soon the painting is ready. Memling presents his vision of the last judgement to Portinari and to some of his friends. The triptych stirs admiration; at the same time everybody is intrigued by the faceless figure at the very bottom of Hell.

The painter explains that the blank face is waiting for the face of the so far uncaptured murderer of his beloved Aleida. The banker asks the gathered people not to talk about the picture before it is supplied with the missing face of Paul Benecke. When this is done, the triptych will be shown to the town.

It is 1473. Tani, cooperating closely with Caterina's father, Francesco Tanaglia, gains a small fortune. In such a situation he decides to go to Bruges to finally buy back the "Last Judgement". Unfortunately, a disease upsets his plans. Instead of him, Caterina, starts on the journey again. When she arrives in Bruges it is April. The preparation are still on to send to Florence goods which are Portinari's property. Apart from fabrics, tapestry, leather, and jewelry, the banker is trying to smuggle to England large quantities of alum without the Medici's knowledge. This illegal transaction would substantially enlarge Portinari's wealth reduced by constant loans for the wars waged by Charles the Bold. The means of transportation is to be the galley "St. Matthew", built in Piza by the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, for the crusaders against the Turks. Now the same ship is to carry Turkish alum – the same which has been excommunicated by the Pope.

Right after her arrival in Bruges, Caterina goes to Memling's studio to pay the last installment for the triptych. Surprised by the visit, the painter tries to hide the truth. Finally, though, he decides to say that the painting has already been paid for. Memling refuses to accept Tani's money; he sends Caterina to Portinari who now is a co-donor of the painting. The woman does not want to go there at first, because of the conflict between Portinari and her husband. She asks the painter to do her this favour, but he is very official toward her now and refuses.

Caterina comes to the bank when Portinari is receiving a Nansa representative. The manager ostentatiously prolongs his conversation with the German, but Tani's wife takes this humiliation calmly. Finally Portinari invites her to his office and, to her surprise, agrees to give back his share in the triptych as a present for his rival – disinterestedly, for the sake of peace. Although Caterina insists, he does not accept her money. Caterina suspects a trap, but she does not know what. She returns to the painter's studio; she wants to see the picture but is told that it is impossible. The triptych has already been packed and taken on board the ship which is to leave for Italy in two days. Caterina visits Portinari again. The bank manager agrees to her travelling with the painting. Caterina goes aboard the ship, asks about the "Last Judgement", but nobody knows anything about it. The captain of the ship says that the triptych has not been delivered yet. The woman decides not leave the galley: she will wait there for the painting and until she sets off to Florence.

Meanwhile, the “Last Judgement” is still in Memling’s studio. It is night. The painter is working on the unfinished figure on the side of the condemned. Portinari does not agree to leaving a blank space instead of a face. He is a Maecenas: he pays and demands. After a fierce quarrel, the painter agrees to paint the missing face. He knows that after the “St. Matthew” has left, he will probably never be able to do it. Despite the long night’s work on this small detail, he fails. He is not pleased with his sketches of a young, arrogant face of Aleida’s murderer. In the morning Portinari comes to take the painting. Standing in front of the picture he cannot hide his disappointment. Instead of a face of young man, the blank space has been filled with grotesquely contorted, suffering face of an old man. The banker sneers at the artist: an old man could not have raped Aleida. Everybody knows that the rapist was a young man, hardly thirty years old. When asked abruptly why he has painted an old man, Memling answers “I don’t know”.

The painting is packed and taken on board the “St. Matthew”. When Caterina learns about it, she demands again to be shown the triptych. The captain, however, refuses. Portinari gave an order that the picture can be unpacked only in Florence. At the same time Caterina is told that if she wants to travel with the painting, she should on no account go ashore. By chance Caterina learns the reason for the injunction. It is suspected that Hansa knows of the attempt to smuggle alum to England. Therefore, the “St. Matthew” may fall into a trap. To avoid it, the halley will set out earlier, this very night. This news has no special meaning for Caterina. Her mind is busy looking for a way to get to the “Last Judgement”. After many failed attempts, she finally succeeds. A bribed sailor unveils the painting and... Caterina, shocked, faints. After she is carried up on deck, she quickly recovers and takes firm steps to prevent the painting’s being taken away. Since conversation with the captain leads nowhere, Caterina goes ashore to see Portinari. She demands that the painting be unshipped immediately. The banker does not even want to talk to her and he orders his servants to turn her out. His satanic laughter follows her into the street.

Caterina sees her only chance in Memling. But the painter cannot help her. When she demands to know why he has done this wrong to Tani, the artist says that he painted him according to his conscience. He defends himself and Portinari; he starts to attack her husband. But Caterina will not listen to it. She rushes out of Memling’s studio and returns to the port. When she tries to get on board the ship, she is kept off: Portinari’s orders. Suddenly she remembers that the ship is to set out earlier. She clings to it as if to a sheet-anchor. She comes with the news to the Hansa representative in Bruges. When asked what she wants in return for such invaluable information, the woman asks for the triptych. After this visit Caterina returns to the wharf again, where she renews her futile attempts to get aboard the ship.

Some hours later, a small German ship sets quietly off in the direction of England, where access to the coast is blocked by the ships of the Hanseatic League. On the way she meets a caravel “Peter of Danzig”, coming from Lubeck under Paul Benecke’s command. At this moment, the fate of the “St. Matthew” is sealed.

April 27, 1473. Portinari’s galley, sailing under the neutral flag of Burgundy, is spotted by Benecke’s armed ship patrolling the territorial waters. When it is found out that the “St. Matthew” is heading for the coast of England, Benecke gives the signal to attack. The hot and bloody fight, in which a number of Italians are killed and several dozen wounded, ends in defeat for Portinari’s galley. The victors manage to haul the ship to port, where Benecke divides the loot among the crew and three Danzig patricians, co-owners of the caravel: John Sidinghusen, Tidemann Valandt, and Henry Viderhoff. It is then that the captain of the ship has a chance to see with them Memling’s triptych for the first time.

Everybody is greatly impressed by the “Last Judgement”. Paul Benecke is literally stunned at recognizing the accomplices of his Bruges crime among the figures thrust into Hell. In the central part of the painting, on the Archangel’s head, he notices the cross which he had ripped off Aleida’s neck. His friend, first helmsman of the ship, Jan of Malbork, witnesses the Dutchman’s horror and associates the cross in the painting with the same cross on Benecke’s neck. They have a conversation in private during which the shocked and frightened Benecke kills his friend. To everybody else he explains Jan’s disappearance as an escape with part of the loot.

The Danzig patricians decide to offer Memling’s triptych to the Church of Our Lady in Danzig. The victorious caravel harbours in her home port to unload the loot. Agonized by nightmares, the horror-stricken Dutchman steals the painting at night and helped by hired people takes it far into Poland. There, staying alone with Memling’s work, he contemplates its contents masochistically for days. He is close to destroying the triptych, but at the same time something prevents him from doing it. His eyes are riveted most of all on the figure in the depths of Hell: the horrified face of the old man seems familiar to him.

Reaction at capturing the galley sailing under the neutral flag of Burgundy is stormy and immediate. Portinari demands that his captured possessions be returned. The ruler of Burgundy, Charles the Bold, intercedes diplomatically, but without result. It turns out that one of the killed persons on the ship was a woman. Everybody is convinced that it is Caterina. When the news reaches Tani, his despair is immense: he accuses himself of unintentionally having caused the death of his wife, who because of his illness, had to go to Bruges

instead of him. The loss of the triptych, which in a way is Tani's final testament, adds to his grief.

He is greatly surprised Caterina, safe and sound, suddenly arrives in Florence. She had not been aboard the ship: she travelled from Bruges by land. His wife's return gives Tani hope for regaining possession of the painting as well. The mystery of the woman's death on the galley "St. Matthew" is explained: during the fight Paul Benecke's caravel Anna was killed. She had slipped in unnoticed on board the ship in order to see Angelo in distant Florence – Angelo with whom she was madly in love. She died in exactly the same position in which she had been painted by Memling in his picture.

Upon learning about Anna's death, Tani is stirred by ambivalent feelings: on the one hand he suffers remorse; on the other he is relieved. Worry about the fate of the "Last Judgement" blinds him to all other things. Now he is afraid that the painting may have been destroyed, and then he suspects that the triptych was not on board since Portinari, ashamed of the artist's "judgement" and feeling humiliated may have hidden it somewhere. He does not know that it is not his enemy but himself, the donor of the work, who is discredited by the painting. Caterina avoids talking about the triptych. This arouses some suspicion in her husband, but it is not clearly defined. Tani is helpless – he knows that only Portinari can take steps to get back the goods, including the "Last Judgement", captured by the men from Danzig. And this is what Portinari does, but the men from Danzig turn a deaf ear to his requests and threats. They agree only to give back the triptych. When Portinari learns about it, he decides to leave for Danzig at once. His pregnant wife tries to protest; she needs his care in that time – but the ambitious banker is uncompromising: he leaves at once. In Danzig it turns out that Portinari can keep the painting under the condition that he actually find it. Benecke and the triptych have disappeared. The first reaction of the emitted Italian is to go back to Bruges, but on second thought he decides to look for the picture alone.

Heading a group of hired people, he sets off in pursuit of Benecke. He finds him standing in front of Memling's work, discussing its metaphysical implications with a group of Polish Jews. Despite a desperate defence of the triptych during which Benecke is seriously wounded, the painting gets into Portinari's hands. He comes with the "Last Judgement" to Danzig, where on the following day he is to board a ship to Bruges. The triptych is shown to the people of Danzig, rousing their admiration. In spite of the Dutchman's firm protest, the Poles refuse to give the painting back. Portinari, furious, sets off to Bruges to start a series of lawsuits against the Hanseatic League. He struggles to regain all goods from the ship, but in fact he is mainly concerned with the "Last Judgement", since he feels he is its creator and forger.

When in 1474 he loses in storm another ship with a precious cargo, he takes it as a sign from God. Completely broken, he comes to Memling's studio where he admits to having deceived the artist: to having slandered Tani and conducted swindles and rogueries. He blames himself for the death of Anna, whom he helped board the ship. He confesses that he tried to transport illegally to England the excommunicated Turkish alum. It is a kind of confession, but Memling does not want to be his confessor. He had found a reason to paint the triptych the way he did – and now Portinari is trying to confuse him. The banker gives a large sum of money to the painter, and begs him to go to Danzig in order to repaint the picture. Memling refuses, and when he hears the hysterically repeated “repaint it, repaint it” – he throws Portinari out of his house. This was the only moment of weakness in the life of the Italian banker. He quickly recovers from it. He starts the lawsuits again. The only thing he achieves is that for one more time Hansa is given a deadline to return the things captured by the people from Danzig. Portinari seems to be recovering economically balance, but then in 1477 in one of his venturous escapades Charles the Bold gets killed. His death means the loss of any chance for Portinari to get back the Duke's huge debts. This, in turn, means the beginning of bankruptcy for the Medici bank in Bruges and for Portinari himself. His political influence ceases as well. The illegal trade with alum comes to light. Medici dissolves the contract with Portinari. Portinari is obliged to take over all the bank's debts.

The chance to get back the “Last Judgement” becomes more remote. The lawsuits recede into the background. Angelo Tani, knowing about it, decides to act more energetically. He sees the only chance for succeeding is the Pope's intervention. Supported by the Medici, he tries to get to the highest church authority, Sixtus IV. Unfortunately, a conflict between the Pope and the Medici begins. Sixtus IV draws his deposits out of their banks, and following his example some Florentine merchants to do the same. Tani gets in touch with the Medici's rivals, the Pazzi family. Thanks to their help he is soon received by the Pope. Tani promises to offer the picture to him, and to devote his life to prayer and God. Soon after, in an angry papal bull addressed to the City Council of Danzig, Sixtus IV demands that the captured goods, and first of all the already famous triptych, be returned. This intervention, although apparently earnestly received by the Danzig people, yields no reaction.

Meanwhile, the rumour about Portinari's “joke” spreads, reaching also his adversary. When Tani wants to go to Danzig personally, Caterina begs him not to do it. Forced to be sincere, she reveals the truth about the triptych. She also tells him about relationship with Memling and about her betraying Portinari's ship to Hansa. Tani is shocked: he withdraws into himself and devotes to prayer

and work. Even bringing up children he leaves to his wife. The only thing left to him is faith in the last judgement.

After the death of Charles the Bold, Duke Maximilian becomes ruler of Burgundy. Portinari's popularity keeps decreasing. The crisis deepens when in 1480 it turns out his friend at the court of Prince Guillaume Biche is a French spy. After his escape to France, Duke Maximilian takes Biche's deposits from Portinari. The bank is again on the verge of bankruptcy. Hans Memling, on the other hand, gets richer and richer. He receives so many commissions that he can hardly cope with them. The Cardinal Grimani from Venice commissions four portraits and several altar paintings. It is the result of seeing "The Passion of Christ" in one of Florence's churches. The artist throws himself into the whirl of work, which is for him a chance to forget the deceptions of the "Last Judgement". When he marries Anna de Valchenaer, he is considered to be one of the richest men in Bruges.

It is 1485. Henry VII, a Tudor and Lancaster's relative, takes over the rule in England. To prevent another war he marries Elisabeth from the house of York. A chance to regain the money lent to the Lancasters long ago opens up for the Medici and for Angelo Tani. Angelo, who is 70, is in poor health and cannot start on his journey right away. He leaves London four years later and travels via Bruges. When he reaches the first stage of his trip, the sick Tani cannot go any further. He gets to the Bruges Hospital of St. John at the moment when the city is excited by an unusual ceremony: St. Ursula's reliquary is being carried from Memling's studio to the hospital. The artist suddenly finds himself face to face with the tragic victim of Portinari's intrigue and of his own mistake. He sees a ruined, sick man. Memling is shocked and remorse returns with double force.

Tani's stay in hospital is prolonged. Meanwhile, Portinari for whom the only chance to get out of debts is to regain the goods from his galley, renews the lawsuit against Danzig. The chances are that the Hanseatic League, which is getting weaker and weaker, must lose. In his attempt to get rid of Hansa's meddling, the Prince of Burgundy gives his support to Portinari. Tani's foes do not wait for the verdict of the suit. Although travel means mortal danger to him, when he hears about the raging plague in Italy Tani decides to return to Florence to be with his family in this time of great panic. Memling, deeply moved by Tani's decision and still harassed by remorse, leaves secretly for Danzig to destroy the triptych. His artist's conscience torments him. He cannot live with the awareness that he, who has always striven for truth, who "meted out justice to the visible world", could leave behind him a work stained with a lie.

Under cover of night Memling comes to the Church of Our Lady in Danzig, determined to destroy the painting. While attempting to do it, he is suddenly attacked by a mysterious man, whom he stabs with a knife while defending himself. When the dying man learns that it is Memling himself who wants to destroy his own painting, he feels a surge of strength. They have a dramatic and surprisingly profound conversation about the relativity of truth. Nobody knows the objective truth, says the man whose face seems familiar to the painter; only God knows it. It is He who is entitled to the Last Judgement. Man must not usurp such a right – neither ruler, nor artist. Destroying the painting would be a crime, since the lie which concerns the people who are still living will be meaningless after their death. And the “Last Judgement”, by stirring emotions in the people who watch it, already fulfilled its role given to it by the artist.

In the morning, the seriously wounded man reveals his secret. Twenty years earlier he became both prisoner and guard of the triptych, almost never leaving the church. He is Paul Benecke, the murderer of the painter’s beloved. The confession brings him inner peace. In his outstretched hand he gives Memling the cross ripped off Aleida’s neck – and he dies. It is only now that the deeply moved artist notices an extraordinary likeness between the face painted in the picture years before and the prematurely aged, dead face of Paul Benecke.

At the same time, the lawsuit concerning the cargo of the “St. Matthew” captured by the Danzig privateers is in progress. Just before the trial begins, Portinari receives confidential information that the lawsuit, having dragged on now for almost twenty years, will be settled in his favour. When he stands before the judge, to depose, he sees to his horror that the judge has the face of Michelangelo from Memling’s painting. Always eloquent, Portinari suddenly loses his self-confidence, starts confusing the facts, gets lost, contradicts himself. In spite of this he wins the case, although the victory is largely a taken one: the cargo, including the triptych, will never be returned to him. The Italian will get only a small indemnity.

Portinari accepts the sentence with the indifference of a catatonic. That night, in a nightmarish dream, he sees a hell-fire and in it – contorted bodies of burning sinners. Among them he is horrified to see himself. But there, next to him, are also Tani, his wife Caterina, and their daughter. And then – it is not a dream any more. The plague decimates almost all Eroupe. Fire consumes the bodies and belongings of the people stricken with sickness. It is not hell-fire, though, but an earthly one.

THE END