

BLACK BREAD

NEIGHBOR NANNI HAD hardly taken his last breath, and the priest in his stole was still there, when the quarrel broke out between the children as to who should pay the costs of the burial, and they went at it till the priest with the aspersorium under his arm was driven away.

For Neighbor Nanni's illness had been a long one, the sort that eats away the flesh off your bones and the things out of your house. Every time the doctor spread his piece of paper on his knee to write out the prescription, Neighbor Nanni watched his hands with beseeching eyes, and mumbled, "Write it short, your honor; anyhow write it short, for mercy's sake.

The doctor carried out his own job. Everybody in the world carries out his own job. In carrying out his, Farmer Nanni had

caught that fever down there at Lamia, land blessed by God, producing corn as high as a man. In vain the neighbors said to him, "Neighbor Nanni, you'll leave your bones on that half-profits farm!"

"As if I were a baron," he replied, "to do what I like and choose!"

The brothers, who were like the fingers on the same hand as long as their father lived, had now each one to think for himself. Santo had a wife and children on his back; Lucia was left without any dowry, as good as turned on the street; and Carmenio, if he wanted to have bread to eat, would have to go away from home and find himself a master. Then the mother, who was old and ailing, didn't know whose business it was to keep her, for none of the three children had anything at all.

The oxen, the sheep, the store in the granary had all gone with their owner. There remained the dark house, with the empty bed, and the equally dark faces of the orphans. Santo carried his things across, with Red-head, his wife, and said he'd take his mamma to live with him. "Then he won't have to pay house rent," said the others. Carmenio made up his own bundle and went as shepherd to Herdsman Vito, who had a piece of grazing land at Camemi; and Lucia threatened to go into service rather than live with her sister-in-law.

"No!" said Santo. "It shan't be said that my sister had to be servant to other folks."

"He wants me to be servant to Red-head," grumbled Lucia.

The great question was this sister-in-law who had driven herself into the family like a nail. "What is there to be done, now I've got her?" sighed Santo shrugging his shoulders. "I should have listened in time to that good soul, my father."

That good soul had preached to him: "Leave yon Nena alone, for she's got never a bit of dowry, nor house, nor land."

But Nena was always at his side, at the Castelluccio farm; whether he was hoeing or mowing, she was there gathering the corn into sheaves, or removing the stones from under his feet with her hands; and when they rested, at the door of the great farm place, they sat together with their backs to the wall, at the hour when the sun was dying over the fields, and everything was going still.

“Neighbor Santo, if God is good you won’t have lost your labors this year.”

“Neighbor Santo, if the harvest turns out well, you ought to take the big field, down on the plain; because the sheep have been on it, and it’s rested for two years.”

“Neighbor Santo, this winter, if I’ve time, I want to make you a pair of thick leggings to keep you warm.”

Santo had got to know Nena while he was working at Castelluccio, a girl with red hair, daughter of the keeper, whom nobody wanted. So for that reason, poor thing, she made a fuss of every dog that passed, and she denied herself the bread from her mouth in order to make Neighbor Santo a present of a black silk stocking-cap, every year at Saint Agrippina’s day, and to have a flask of wine for him, or a piece of cheese, when he arrived at Castelluccio. “Take this, for my sake, Neighbor Santo. It’s the same as the master drinks.” Or else: “I’ve been thinking, you never had a bit of something to eat with your bread not all last week.”

He didn’t say no, but took everything. The most he ever did was to say out of politeness, “This won’t do, Neighbor Nena, you deny your own self to give to me.”

“I like it better for you to have it.”

And then, every Saturday night when Santo went home, that dear departed soul used to tell him again: Leave yon Nena alone, for she hasn’t got this; leave yon Nena alone, for she hasn’t got the other.

"I know I've got nothing," said Nena as she sat on the low wall facing the setting sun. "I've neither land nor houses; and to get together that bit of linen I've had to go without bread to eat. My father is a poor keeper, who lives at his master's charge, and nobody wants to saddle himself with a wife without a dowry."

Nevertheless the nape of her neck was fair, as it usually is with red-haired people; and as she sat with her head bowed, all those thoughts heavy inside it, the sun glowed among the golden-colored hairs behind her ears, and lit on her cheeks that had a fine down like a peach; and Santo looked at her flax-blue eyes, and at her breast that filled her stays and swayed like the cornfield.

"Don't you worry, Neighbor Nena," he said. "You won't go short of husbands."

She shook her head, saying no; and her red earrings that were almost like coral caressed her cheeks. "No, no, Neighbor Santo. I know I'm not beautiful, and nobody wants me."

"Look though!" said he all at once, as the idea came to him. "Look how opinions vary! They say red hair is ugly, and yet on you now it doesn't strike me as bad."

The good departed soul, his father, when he saw that Santo was altogether smitten with Nena and wanted to marry her, had said to him one Sunday: "You want her whether or not, that Red-head? Say the truth, you want her whether or not?"

Santo, with his back to the wall and his hands behind him, didn't dare to raise his head; but he nodded yes, yes, that he didn't know what to do with himself without the Red-head, and it was the will of God it should be so.

"And have you given it a thought as to how you're going to keep a wife? You know I can give you nothing. But I've one thing to tell you, and your mother here will say the same: think it over before you go and get married, for bread is scarce, and children come quick."

His mother, crouching on the stool, pulled him by the jacket and said to him *sotto voce*, with a long face: "Try and fall in love with the widow of Farmer Mariano, she's rich, and she won't ask a great deal of you, being part paralyzed."

"Oh yes!" grumbled Santo, "You may bet Farmer Mariano's widow would take up with a beggar like me!"

Neighbor Nanni also agreed that Farmer Mariano's widow was looking for a husband as rich as herself, hip-lame though she was. And then there'd have been that other misery to look forward to, seeing your grandchildren born lame as well.

"Well, it's for you to think about it," he repeated to his son. "Remember that bread is scarce, and children come quick."

Then toward evening on Saint Bridget's day Santo had met the Red-head by chance, as she was gathering wild asparagus beside the path, and she blushed at seeing him as if she didn't know quite well that he had to pass that way going back to the village, and she dropped down the hem of her skirt that she had turned up around her waist for going on all fours among the cactus plants. The young man looked at her, he also went red in the face, and could say nothing. At last he began to stammer that the week was over and he was going home. "You've no messages to send to the village, Neighbor Nena? Tell me if I can do anything."

"If I'm going to sell the asparagus, I'll come along with you, and we'll go the same way," said Red-head. And he, as if stupefied, nodded yes, yes; she added, with her chin on her heaving bosom: "But you don't want me, women are a nuisance to you."

"I'd like to carry you in my arms, Neighbor Nena, carry you in my arms."

Then Neighbor Nena began to chew the corner of the red handkerchief she wore around her head. And Neighbor Santo again had nothing to say; but he looked at her, and looked at her, and changed his saddlebag from one shoulder to the

other, as if he couldn't find words to begin. The mint and the marjoram were making the air merry, and the side of the mountain, above the cacti, was all red with sunset. "You go now," Nena said to him. "You go now, it's late." Then she stood listening to the night crickets rattling away. But Santo didn't move. "You go now, somebody might see us here by ourselves."

Neighbor Santo, who was really going at last, came out again with his old assertion, and another shake of the shoulder to settle his double sack, that he'd have carried her in his arms, he would, he'd have carried her if they'd been going the same road. And he looked Neighbor Nena in the eyes, and she avoided his looks and kept on seeking for the wild asparagus among the stones, and he watched her face that was as red as if the sunset were beating upon it.

"No, Neighbor Santo, you go on by yourself, you know I'm a poor girl with no dowry."

"Let us do as Providence wishes, let us —"

She kept on saying no, that she was not for him, and now her face was dark and frowning. Then Neighbor Santo, downcast, settled his bag on his shoulder and moved away, with bent head. But Red-head wanted at least to give him the asparagus that she had gathered for him. They'd make a nice little dish for him, if he would eat them for her sake. And she held out to him the two corners of the full apron. Santo put his arm around her waist and kissed her on the cheek, his heart melting inside him.

At that moment her father appeared, and the girl ran away in a fright. The keeper had his gun on his arm, and didn't see at all what should prevent him from laying Neighbor Santo out for practicing this treachery on him.

"No! I'm not like that!" replied Santo with his hands crossed on his breast. "I want to marry your daughter, I do. Not

for fear of the gun; but I'm the son of a good man, and Providence will help us because we do no wrong."

So the wedding took place on a Sunday, with the bride in her holiday dress, and her father the keeper in new boots in which he waddled like a tame duck. Wine and baked beans made even Neighbor Nanni merry, though he had the malaria on him bad; and the mother took out of the chest a pound or two of worsted yarn that she had put aside toward a dowry for Lucia, who was already eighteen, and who combed and arranged her hair for half an hour every Sunday morning before going to mass, looking at herself in the water of the wash-bowl, for a mirror.

Santo, with the tips of his ten fingers stuck in the pockets of his coat, exulted as he looked at the red hair of his bride, at the yarn, and at all the celebration that there was for him that Sunday. The keeper, with a red nose, hobbled inside his shoes and wanted to kiss them all around, one after the other.

"Not me!" said Lucia, sulky because of the yarn they were taking from her. "This isn't water for my mouth."

She stayed in a corner pulling a sulky face, as if she already knew what her lot would be the moment her parents were gone.

And now sure enough she had to cook the bread and sweep the house for her sister-in-law, who as soon as God sent daylight set off for the field with her husband, although she was again with child, she being worse than a cat for filling the house with little ones. There was more needed now than presents at Christmas and at Saint Agrippina's day, or than the pretty talk she used to have with Neighbor Santo at Castelluccio. That swindler of a keeper had done well for himself marrying off his daughter without a dowry, and now Neighbor Santo had to see about maintaining her. Since he'd got Nena he saw that there wasn't bread enough for the two of them, and that they'd got to wring it out of the earth at Licciardo, in the sweat of their brow.

As they went to Licciardo with the double bag over their shoulder, wiping the sweat from their foreheads on their shirt-sleeves, they had the young corn always in their mind and in front of their eyes, they saw nothing else but that between the stones of the path. It was to them like the thought of one who is sick and whom you have always heavy on your heart, that corn; first yellow, swamped in mud with all the rain; and then, when it did begin to get a bit of hold, came the weeds, so that Nena had made pitiful work of both her hands, pulling them out one by one, bending down over all that load of her belly, drawing her skirt above her knees so as not to hurt the corn. And she didn't feel the weight of her child, nor the pains of her back, as if every green blade that she freed from the weeds was a child she had borne. And when at last she squatted on the little bank, panting, pushing her hair behind her ears with both her hands, she seemed to see before her the tall ears of June, bending over one above the other as the breeze touched them; and they would reckon up, she and her husband, as he was untying his soaking gaiters, and cleaning his hoe on the grass of the bank: So much seed they had taken, and therefore they'd have so much corn if the ear came to twelvefold or to tenfold or even to sevenfold; the stalk wasn't very stout but the growth was thick. If only March was not too dry, and if only it didn't rain except when rain was needed! Blessed Saint Agripina must remember them! The sky was clear and the sun lingered in gold on the green meadows, from the fiery west, whence the larks fell singing onto the clods, like black dots. Spring was really beginning everywhere, in the cactus hedges, in the bushes of the little road, between the stones, on the roofs of the hamlets green with hope; and Santo, walking heavily behind his companion, who was bent beneath the sack of straw for the animals, with all that belly on her, felt his heart swell with tenderness for the poor thing, and went along

talking to her, his voice broken by the steep climbs, about what he'd do if the Lord blessed the corn up to the last. Now they didn't have to talk anymore about red hair, whether it was beautiful or ugly, or any such nonsense. And when treacherous May came with its mists to rob them of all their labors and their hopes of harvest, the husband and wife, seated once more on the bank watching the field going yellow under their eyes, like a sick man departing to the otherworld, said not a word, their elbows on their knees and their eyes stony in their pale faces.

"This is God's punishment!" muttered Santo. "That sainted soul my father told me how it would be."

And into the hovel of the poor penetrated the ill humor of the black, muddy little road outside. Husband and wife turned their backs on one another stupefied, and they quarreled every time Red-head asked for money to buy necessaries, or whenever the husband came home late, or when there wasn't enough wood for the winter, or when the wife became slow and idle with her childbearing; long faces, ugly words, and even blows. Santo seized Nena by her red hair, and she set her nails in his face; the neighbors came running up, and Red-head squealed that that villain wanted to make her have a miscarriage, and that he didn't care if he sent a soul to hell. Then, when Nena had her baby, they made peace again, and Neighbor Santo went carrying the infant girl in his arms, as if he had fathered a princess, and ran to show her to his relations and his friends, he was so pleased. And for his wife, as long as she was in bed he made her broth, he swept the house, he cleaned the rice, he stood there in front of her to see that she wanted for nothing. Then he went to the door with the baby at his shoulder, like a wet nurse; and to anybody who asked him, as they were passing, he replied: "It's a girl, neighbor! Bad luck follows me even here, and I've got a girl born to me. My wife couldn't do any better than that."

And when Red-head got knocks from her husband, she turned on her sister-in-law, who never did a hand's turn to help in the house, and Lucia flew back at her saying that without having any husband of her own she'd got all the burden of other folk's children foisted on her. The mother-in-law, poor thing, tried to make peace in these quarrels, repeating: "It's my fault, I'm no good for anything now. I eat idle bread, I do."

She was no good for anything but to hear all those miseries, and to brood over them inside herself; Santo's difficulties, his wife's crying, the thought of her other son far away, a thought that stuck in her heart like a nail; Lucia's bad temper, because she hadn't got a rag of a Sunday frock and never saw so much as a dog pass under her window. On Sundays, if they called her to join the group of gossips who were chattering in the shadow, she replied with a shrug of the shoulders: "What do you want me to come for? To show you the silk frock I haven't got?"

Sometimes however Pino the Tome, him of the frogs, would join the group of neighbor women, though he never opened his mouth, but stood with his back to the wall and his hands in his pockets, listening, and spitting all over the place. Nobody knew what he came for; but when Neighbor Lucia appeared in the doorway, Pino looked at her from under his eyes, pretending to be turning to spit. And at evening, when all the street doors were shut, he went so far as to sing her little songs outside the door, making his own bass for himself — huum! huum! huum! Sometimes the young fellows of the village going home late, recognizing his voice would strike up the frog tune, to mock him.

Meanwhile Lucia pretended to be busying herself about the house, as far as possible from the light, her head sunk, so that they shouldn't see her face. But if her sister-in-law grumbled, "There goes the music!" she turned around like a viper to retort: "Even the music is a trouble to you, is it? In this

galley-hole there musn't be anything for eyes to see nor ears to hear, my word!"

The mother who noticed everything, and who was also listening, watching her daughter, said that as far as she was concerned that music made her feel happy inside herself. Lucia pretended not to understand anything. Yet every day, at the time when the frog fellow was due to be passing, she did not fail to be standing in the doorway with her distaff in her hand. The Tome, as soon as he got back from the river, went round and round the village, always returning to that particular quarter, with the remains of his frogs in his hand, crying, "Song fish! song fish!" As if the poor folks of those mean streets could afford to buy song fish!

"But they must be good for sick people!" said Lucia, who was dying to get a start bargaining with the Tome. But the mother wouldn't let them spend money on her.

The Tome, seeing Lucia watching him from under her eyes, her chin on her breast, slackened his pace before the door, and on Sunday he summoned enough courage to draw a little nearer, till he came so far as to sit on the steps of the next terrace, with his hands hanging between his thighs; and he told all the women in the group about how you caught frogs, how it needed the devil's own cunning. He was more cunning than a red-haired ass, was Pino the Tome, and he waited till the goodwives had gone away to say to Neighbor Lucia, "We want rain badly for the corn, don't we!" Or else, "Olives will be scarce this year!"

"What does that matter to you? You live by your frogs," Lucia said to him.

"You hark here, my dear friend; we are all like the fingers on one hand; or like the tiles on the roof of the house, one sending water to the other. If there's no crop of corn or of olives, there'll be no money coming into the village, and nobody will buy my frogs. You follow what I mean?"

That "my dear friend" went sweet as honey to the heart of the girl, and she thought about it all evening long as she was spinning silently beside the lamp; and she turned it around and around in her mind, like her spool that spun from her fingers.

The mother seemed as if she read into the secrets of the distaff, and when for a few weeks no more songs had been heard in the evening, and the frog seller had not been seen going past, she said to her daughter-in-law: "How miserable the winter is! We don't hear a living soul in the neighborhood."

Now they had to keep the door shut, for the cold, and through the little opening they never saw a thing except the window of the house across the road, black with rain, or some neighbor going home in his soaking wet cloak. But Pino the Tome never showed his face, so that if a poor sick person wanted a drop of frog broth, said Lucia, there was no telling how you were going to get it to her.

"He'll have gone to earn his bread some other road," said the sister-in-law. "It's a poor trade, that is, and nobody would follow it who could do anything else."

Santo, who had heard the chatter on Saturday evening, made his sister the following speech, out of love for her: "I don't like this talk about the man who lives on frog catching, and stands with his legs in the wet all day long! You ought to get a man who works on the land, so that even if he owned nothing, at least he'd be drawn from the same class as yourself."

Lucia was silent, her head lowered and her brows knit, biting her lips from time to time so as not to blurt out: "And where am I going to find a man who works on the land?" How indeed was she to find him, all by herself? The only one she had managed to find now never showed his face anymore, probably because Red-head had played her some nasty trick, envious, tattling creature that she was. There was Santo who never said anything but what his wife said, and she, the

Redhead, had gone around repeating that the frog man was a good-for-nought, which bit of news of course had come to the ears of Neighbor Pino.

Therefore squabbles broke out every moment between the two sisters-in-law.

"The mistress here isn't me, that it isn't," grumbled Lucia. "The mistress in this house is the one who was clever enough to wheedle round my brother and snap him up for a husband."

"If I'd only known what was coming I'd never have wheedled round him, I wouldn't brother or no brother; because if I needed one loaf of bread before, now I need five."

"What does it matter to you whether the frog catcher has got a proper trade or not? If he was my husband, it would be his business to look after keeping me."

The mother, poor thing, came between them to soothe them down; but she was a woman of few words, and she didn't know what to do but run from one to the other, clutching her hair with her hands, stammering:

"For mercy's sake! for mercy's sake!"

But the women took not the slightest notice of her, setting their nails in each other's faces after Red-head had called Lucia that bad word, "Nasty cat!"

"Nasty cat yourself! You stole my brother from me!"

Then arrived Santo, and gave both of them knocks to quiet them, so that Red-head, weeping, grumbled: "I say it for her own good! because if a woman marries a man who's got nothing, troubles come fast enough."

And to his sister, who was screaming and tearing her hair, Santo said, to quiet her: "Well what do you expect, now that she is my wife? But I'm fond of you and I speak for your own sake. You see what a lot of good we've done ourselves by getting married, us two!"

Lucia lamented to her mother: "I want to do as much good

for myself as they've done for themselves! I'd rather go out to service! If a mortal man does show his face around here, they drive him away." And she thought about the frog catcher of whom there was never a sign nowadays.

Afterward they got to know that he had gone to live with the widow of Farmer Mariano; even that he was thinking of getting married to her; because though it was true he hadn't got a proper trade, he was nonetheless a fine piece of a young fellow, built without any sparing of material, and as handsome as San Vito in flesh and blood, that he was; and the lame woman had property enough to be able to take what husband she liked and chose.

"Look at this, Neighbor Pino," she said. "This is all white things, linen and everything, these are all gold earrings and necklaces; in this jar there are twelve gallons of oil; and that section is full of beans. If you like you can live with your hands in your pockets, and you needn't stand up to your knees in the marsh catching frogs."

"I should like it all right," said the Tome. But he thought of Lucia's black eyes looking for him under the cotton panes of the window, and then of the hips of the lame woman, which woggled like a frog's as she went about the house showing him all her stuff. However, one day when he hadn't been able to get a scrap of anything for three days and had had to stay in the widow's house, eating and drinking and watching the rain fall outside the door, he persuaded himself to say yes, out of love for daily bread.

"It was for the sake of my daily bread, I swear to you," he said with his hands crossed on his breast, when he came back to look for Neighbor Lucia outside her door. "If it hadn't been for the hard times, I wouldn't have married the lame woman, I wouldn't, Neighbor Lucia!"

"Go and tell that to the lame woman herself," replied the

girl, green with bile. "I've only got this to say to you; you don't set foot here anymore."

And the lame woman also told him that he wasn't to set foot there anymore, for if he did she'd turn him out of her house, naked and hungry as when she had taken him in. "Don't you know that, even more than to God, you're obliged to me for the bread you eat?"

But as her husband he went short of nothing: well clad, well fed, with shoes on his feet and nothing else to do but lounge in the marketplace all day, at the greengrocer's, at the butcher's, at the fishmonger's, with his hands behind his back and his belly full, watching them buy and sell.

"That's his real trade, being a vagabond!" said Red-head. And Lucia gave it back to her again, saying that if he did nothing it was because he'd got a rich wife who kept him. "If he'd married me he'd have worked to keep his wife." Santo, with his head in his hands, was thinking how his mother had told him to take the lame woman himself, and how it was his own fault if he'd let the bread slip from his mouth.

"When we're young," he preached to his sister, "we have these notions in our heads, like you have now, and we only think of pleasing ourselves, without counting what comes after. Ask Red-head now if she thinks folks ought to do as we have done."

Red-head, squatting on the threshold, shook her head in agreement with him, while her brats squealed around her, pulling her by the dress and the hair.

"At least the Lord God shouldn't send the plague of children," she said fretfully.

As many children as she could she took with her to the field, every morning, like a mare with her foals; the least one inside the bag over her shoulder, and the one a bit bigger she led by the hand. But she was forced to leave the other three at home, to drive her sister-in-law crazy. The one in the sack and

the one that trotted limping behind her screamed in concert the length of the rough road, in the cold of the white dawn, and the mother had to pause from time to time, scratching her head and sighing: "Oh, my Lord!" And she breathed on the tiny blue hands of the little girl, to warm them, or she took the baby out of the sack to put it to her breast as she walked. Her husband went in front, bent under his load, and if he turned half round, waiting to give her time to overtake him, all out of breath as she was, dragging the little girl by the hand, and with her breast bare, it wasn't to look at the hair of Red-head, or at her breast that heaved inside her stays, like at Castelluccio. Now Red-head tipped out her breast in sun and frost, as if it served for nothing more except to give out milk, exactly like a mare. A real beast of burden, though as far as that went her husband could not complain of her: hoeing, mowing, sowing, better than a man, when she pulled up her skirts, and was black half-way up her legs, on the corn land. She was twenty-seven years old now, with something else to do besides think of thin shoes and blue stockings. "We are old," said her husband, "and we've got the children to think of." But anyhow they helped one another like two oxen yoked to the same plow, which was what their marriage amounted to now.

"I know only too well," grumbled Lucia, "that I've got all the trouble of children, without ever having a husband. When that poor old woman shuts her eyes at last, if they want to give me my bit of bread they'll give it, and if they don't they'll turn me out on to the street."

The mother, poor thing, didn't know what to answer, and sat there listening to her, seated beside the bed with the kerchief around her head and her face yellow with illness. During the day she sat in the doorway, in the sun, keeping still and quiet till the sunset paled upon the blackish roofs opposite, and the goodwives called the fowls to roost.

Only, when the doctor came to see her, and her daughter put the candle near her face, she asked him, with a timid smile:

“For mercy’s sake, your honor, is it a long job?”

Santo, who had a heart of gold, replied: “I don’t mind spending money on medicine, so long as we can keep the poor old mother here with us, and I can know I shall find her in her corner when I come home. Then she’s worked her share, in her own day, and when we are old our children will do as much for us.”

And then it happened that Carmenio had caught the fever at Camemi. If the master had been rich he’d have bought him medicine; but Herdsman Vito was a poor devil who lived on that bit of a flock, and he kept the boy really out of charity, for he could have looked after that handful of sheep himself, if it hadn’t been for fear of the malaria. But then he wanted to do the good work of giving bread to Neighbor Nanni’s orphan, hoping by that means to win over Providence to his help, as it ought to help him, if there was justice in heaven. How was it his fault if he owned nothing but that bit of grazing land at Camemi, where the malaria curdled like snow, and Carmenio had caught the ague? One day when the boy felt his bones broken by the fever, he let himself sink asleep behind a rock that printed a black shadow on the dusty little road, while heavy flies were buzzing in the sultry air of May, and in a minute the sheep broke into the neighbor’s corn, a poor little field as big as a pocket-handkerchief, already half eaten up by the hot drought. Nevertheless Uncle Cheli, who was curled up under a little roof of boughs, cherished it like the apple of his eye, that corn patch that had cost him so much sweat and was the hope of the year for him. Seeing the sheep devouring him, he cried: “Ah! You Christians don’t eat bread, don’t you?”

And Carmenio woke up under the blows and kicks of Uncle Cheli, and began to run like a madman after the

scattered sheep, weeping and yelling. Carmenio, who had his bones already broken by the ague, stood badly in need of that cudgeling! But he thought, did he, that he could pay in squeals and laments for the damage done to his neighbor?

“A year’s work lost, and my children without bread this winter! Look at the damage you’ve done, you assassin! If I skin you alive it won’t be as much as you deserve.”

Uncle Cheli went around getting witnesses to go to law with the sheep of Herdsman Vito. The latter, when he was served with the summons, felt as if he was struck with paralysis, and his wife as well. “Ah, that villain of a Carmenio has ruined us all! You do somebody a good turn, and this is how they pay you back! Did he expect me to stop there in all the malaria and watch the sheep? Now Uncle Cheli will finish us off into poverty, making us pay costs.” The poor devil ran to Camemi at midday, blinded by despair, because of all the misfortunes that were raining down on him, and with every kick and every punch on the jaw he gave to Carmenio, he stammered, panting: “You’ve brought us down to nothing! You’ve landed us in ruin, you brigand!”

“Don’t you see how sick I am?” Carmenio tried to answer, parrying the blows. “How is it my fault, if I couldn’t stand on my feet with fever? It got me unawares, there, under the rock.”

Nonetheless he had to make up his bundle there and then, and say good-bye to the five dollar pieces that were due to him from Herdsman Vito, and leave the flock. And Herdsman Vito was downright glad to catch the fever again, he was so overwhelmed by his troubles.

Carmenio said nothing at home, when he came back empty-handed and empty-bellied, with his bundle on a stick over his shoulder. Only his mother grieved at seeing him so pale and wasted, and didn’t know what to think. She learned everything later from Don Venerando, who lived just near and had also land at Camemi, next the field of Uncle Cheli.

“Don’t you tell anybody why Uncle Vito sent you away,” said the mother to her boy. “If you do, nobody will take you on as a hired lad.” And Santo added as well: “Don’t say anything about having tertian fever, because if you do nobody will want you, knowing you’re ill.”

However, Don Venerando took him for his flock at Santa Margherita, where the shepherd was robbing him right and left, and doing him more hurt even than the sheep in the corn. “I’ll give you medicine myself, and so you’ll have no excuse for going to sleep, and letting the sheep rove where they like.”

Don Venerando had developed a kindly feeling toward all the family, out of love for Lucia, whom he used to see from his little terrace when he was taking the air after dinner. “If you like to give the girl as well I’ll give her half a dollar a month.” And he said moreover that Carmenio could go to Santa Margherita with his mother, because the old woman was losing ground from day to day, and with the flock she would at any rate not lack for eggs, and milk, and a bit of mutton broth, when a sheep died. Red-head stripped herself of the best of anything she had worth taking, to get together a little bundle of white washing for the old woman. It was now sowing time, and they couldn’t come and go every day from Licciardo, and winter, the season of scarcity of everything, would be on them again. So now Lucia said she absolutely would go as servant in the house of Don Venerando.

They put the old woman on the ass, Santo on one side and Carmenio on the other, and the bundle behind; and the mother, while she let them have their way with her, said to her daughter, looking at her with heavy eyes from her blanched face: “Who knows if we shall ever see one another again? Who knows if we shall ever see one another again? They say I shall come back in April. You live in the fear of the Lord, in your master’s house. Anyhow you’ll want for nothing there.”

Lucia sobbed in her apron, and Red-head did the same, poor thing. At that moment they had made peace, and held their arms around one another, weeping together.

“Red-head has got a good heart,” said her husband. “The trouble is we aren’t rich enough to be always fond of one another. When hens have got nothing else to peck at in the fowl house, they peck at one another.”

Lucia was now well settled in Don Venerando’s house, and she said she never wanted to leave it till she died, as folks always say, to show their gratitude to the master. She had as much bread and soup as she wanted, a glass of wine every day, and her own plate of meat on Sundays and holidays. So that her month’s wages lay in her pocket untouched, and at evening she had also time to spin herself linen for her dowry on her own account. She had already got the man ready to hand, there in the selfsame house: Brasi the kitchen man who did the cooking and also helped in the fields when necessary. The master had got rich in the same way, in service at the baron’s, and now he was a Don, and had farmland and cattle in abundance. Because she came from a respectable family that had fallen on evil days, and they knew she was honest, they had given her the lighter jobs to do, to wash the dishes, and go down into the cellar, and look after the fowls; with a cupboard under the stairs to sleep in, quite like a little bedroom, with a bed and a chest of drawers and everything; so that Lucia never wanted to leave till she died. Meanwhile she turned her eyes on Brasi, and confided to him that in two or three years she’d have a bit of savings of her own and would be able to “go out into the world,” if the Lord called her.

Brasi was deaf in that ear. But Lucia pleased him, with her eyes as black as coals, and the good flesh she had on her bones, and for her part she liked Brasi too; a little, curly-headed fellow with the delicate cunning face of a little fox-dog. While they

were washing dishes or putting wood under the boiler he invented every kind of roguery to make her laugh, as if he was trying to rouse her up. He squirted water onto the back of her neck, and stuck endive leaves in her hair. Lucia squealed subduedly, so that the masters shouldn't hear; she took refuge in the corner by the oven, her face as red as fire, and she threw dishrags and twigs in his face, whilst the water trickled down her back like a thrill.

"With meat you make rissoles — I've made mine, you make yours."

"I won't," replied Lucia. "I don't like these jokes."

Brasi pretended to be mortified. He picked up the leaf of endive that she had thrown at him, and stuck it in his bosom, inside his shirt, grumbling: "This belongs to me. I don't touch you. It belongs to me and is going to stop here. Don't you want something from me, to put in the same place, you?" And he pretended to pull out a handful of his hair to offer her, sticking out the length of his tongue as he did so.

She punched him with the solid punches of a peasant woman, which made him hunch up his back, and gave him bad dreams at night, he said. She seized him like a little dog by the hair, and found a certain pleasure in thrusting her fingers in that soft, curly wool.

"Keep it up! Keep it up! I'm not touchy like you, and I'd let myself be pounded to sausage-meat by your hands."

One day Don Venerando caught him at these games, and made the devil of a row. He wasn't going to have carryings-on in his house; he'd kick them both out if there was anymore of it. And yet when he found the girl alone in the kitchen he took her by the chin and wanted to caress her with two fingers.

"No! no!" replied Lucia, "I don't like those sort of carryings-on. If you don't leave me alone I'll get my things and go."

"You like them from him all right, you like them from him. And yet not from me who are your master? What do you mean by it? Don't you know I can give you gold rings and gold earrings with pendants, and make you up your dowry if I like."

Certainly he could, Brasi assured her, for the master had any amount of money, and his wife wore a silk mantle like a lady, now that she was old and thin as a mummy, for which reason her husband came down to the kitchen to have his little joke with the maids. And he came as well to watch his own interests, how much wood they burned, and how much meat they were putting down to roast. He was rich, yes, but he knew what it cost to get property together, and he quarreled all day long with his wife, who had no end of vanities in her head, now that she played the lady, and had taken to complaining of the smoke from the faggots and the nasty smell of onions.

"I want to gather my dowry together with my own hands," retorted Lucia. "My mother's daughter wants to remain an honest girl, in case any Christian should ask her to be his wife."

"Remain it then!" replied her master. "You'll see what a grand dowry it will be, and how many men will come after your honesty!"

If the pasta was a little overcooked, if Lucia brought to table a couple of fried eggs that smelled a bit singed, Don Venerando abused her thoroughly, quite another man in his wife's presence, with his stomach stuck out and his voice loud. Did they think they were making swill for the pigs? With two servants in the kitchen sending everything to rack and ruin! Another time he'd throw the dish in her face! The mistress, blessed dear, didn't want all that racket, because of the neighbors, and she sent away the servant, squealing in falsetto: "Be off into the kitchen; get out of here, you jackanapes! you wastrel!"

Lucia went to cry her eyes out in the corner by the oven, but Brasi consoled her, with that tricky face of his.

“What does it matter? Let them rattle! If we took any notice of the masters it would be poor us! The eggs smelled burned? All the worse for them! I can’t split the wood in the yard and turn the eggs at the same time. They make me do the cooking and the outside work as well, and then they expect to be waited on like the king. I should think they’ve forgotten the days when he used to eat bread and onion under an olive tree, and she used to go gleaning corn.”

Then servant-maid and cook discussed their “misfortunes,” born as they were of “respectable people,” and their parents were richer than the master, once upon a time. Brasi’s father was a cart builder, no less, and it was the son’s own fault if he hadn’t wanted to follow the same trade, but had taken it into his head to go wandering around the fairs, following the car of the traveling draper, and it was then he had learned to cook and look after a horse and cattle.

Lucia recommenced the litany of her woes — her father, the cattle, Red-head, the bad harvest — both of them alike, she and Brasi, in that kitchen; they seemed made for one another.

“What, another case of your brother and Red-head?” replied Brasi. “Much obliged!” However he did not want to insult her with it, straight to her face. He didn’t care a rap that she was a peasant. He didn’t reject her out of pride. But they were both of them poor, and it would have been better to throw themselves down the well with a stone around their necks.

Lucia swallowed that bitter pill without saying a word, and if she wanted to cry she went and hid in the stair cupboard, or in the oven corner, when Brasi wasn’t there. For she was now very fond of that Christian, what with being with him in front of the fire all day long. The reprimands and abuse of the master she took upon herself, and kept the best plate of food for him, and the fullest glass of wine, and went into the yard to

chop wood for him, and had learned to turn the eggs and dish up the pasta to a nicety. Brasi, as he saw her crossing herself, with her bowl on her knees, before she began to eat, said to her: "Have you never seen food in your life before?"

He grumbled at everything all the time; that it was a galley slave's life, and that he had only three hours an evening to go for a walk or to go to the inn. Lucia sometimes went so far as to ask him, with her head bent and her face growing red: "Why do you go to the inn? Leave the inn alone, it's not the place for you."

"Anybody can see you're a peasant," he replied. "You folks think there's the devil in the public house. I was born of shop workers, masters of their trade, my dear. I am not a clod-hopper!"

"I say it for your good. You spend all your money, and besides there's always a chance of you starting a quarrel with somebody."

Brasi felt himself soften at these words, and at those eyes that avoided looking at him. And he allowed himself the gratification of asking:

"Well, does it matter to you, anyhow?"

"No, it doesn't matter to me. I speak for your own sake."

"Well, doesn't it get on *your* nerves, stopping here in the house all day long?"

"No, I thank the Lord I am so well off, and I wish all my own people were like me, and lacked for nothing."

She was just drawing the wine, squatting with the jug between her knees, and Brasi had come down into the cellar with her to show her a light. As the cellar was big and dark as a church, and not even a fly was to be heard in that subterranean place, only they two alone, Brasi and Lucia, he put his arm around her neck and kissed her on her coral-red mouth.

The poor lass remained overcome, as she crouched with her eyes on the jug, and they were both silent, she hearing his

heavy breathing, and the gurgling of the wine. But then she gave a stifled cry, drawing back all trembling, so that a little of the red froth was spilled on the floor.

"Why what's amiss?" exclaimed Brasi. "As if I'd given you a slap on the face! It isn't true then that you like me?"

She dared not look him in the face, though she was dying to. She stared at the spilled wine, embarrassed, stammering:

"Oh poor me! Oh poor me! What have I done? The master's wine!"

"Eh! let it go; he's got plenty, the master has! Listen to me rather. Don't you care for me? Say it, yes or no!"

This time she let him take her hand, without replying, and when Brasi asked her to give him the kiss back again, she gave it him, red with something that was not altogether shame.

"Have you never had one before?" asked Brasi laughing. "What a joke! You are all trembling, as if I'd said I was going to kill you."

"Yes, I do like you," she replied, "but I could hardly tell you. Don't take any notice if I'm trembling. It's because I was frightened about the wine."

"There now, think of that! You do, eh? Since when? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Since that saying we were made for one another."

"Ah!" said Brasi, scratching his head. "Let's go up, the master might come."

Lucia was all happiness since that kiss, it seemed to her as if Brasi had sealed on her mouth his promise to marry her. But he never spoke of it, and if the girl tried him on that score, he replied: "What are you bothering about? Besides, what's the good putting our necks in the yoke, when we can be together just as if we were married."

"No, it's not the same. Now you fend for yourself and I fend for myself, but when we are married, we shall be one."

"And a lovely thing that will be, an' all! Besides, we don't belong to the same walk of life. It would be different if you had a bit of dowry."

"Ah! what a black heart you've got! No! You've never cared for me!"

"Yes, I have! And I'm ready for you for whatever you want of me; but without talking about that there — "

"No! I don't want any of that sort of thing! Leave me alone, and don't look at me anymore!"

Now she knew what men were like. All liars and traitors. She didn't want to hear of it anymore. She'd rather throw herself head first down the well; she wanted to become a Daughter of Mary; she wanted to take her good name and throw it out of the window! What good was it to her, without a dowry? She wanted to break her neck with that old creature her master, and get her dowry out of her shame. Now that — ! Now that — ! Don Venerando was always hanging around her, first saying nice things and then nasty, looking after his own interests, seeing if they put too much wood on the fire, how much oil they used for the frying, sending Brasi to buy a ha'-porth of snuff, and trying to take Lucia by the chin, running around after her in the kitchen, on tiptoe so his wife shouldn't hear, scolding the girl for her lack of respect for him, making him run in that fashion! "No! No!" She was like a mad cat. She'd rather take her things and go! "And where shall you find anything to eat? And how shall you find a husband, without a dowry? Look at these ear-rings! Then I'll give you fifty dollars for your dowry. Brasi would have both his eyes pulled out, for fifty dollars."

Ah, that black-hearted Brasi! He left her in the wicked hands of her master, which trembled as they pawed at her. Left her with the thought of her mother, who hadn't long to live; and of the bare house empty of everything except trouble, and

of Pino the Tome who had thrown her over to go and eat the bread of the widow! He left her with the temptation of the earrings and the fifty dollars in her head!

And one day she came into the kitchen with her face all dismayed, and the gold pendants dangling against her cheeks. Brasi opened his eyes, and said to her; "How fine you look now, Neighbor Lucia."

"Ah! You like me in them? All right, all right!"

Brasi, now that he saw the earrings and the rest, strove so hard to show himself helpful and useful to her, that you might have thought she had become another mistress in the house. He left her the fuller plate, and the best seat at the fire. And he opened his heart wide to her, that they were two poor things both of them, and it did your soul good to tell your troubles to somebody you were fond of. And as soon as he could scrape fifty dollars together he'd set up a little public house and a wife. He in the kitchen, she behind the bar. And then you weren't at anybody's bidding. If the master liked to do them a good turn, he could do it without hurting himself, because fifty dollars was a pinch of snuff to him. And Brasi wouldn't look down his nose, not he! One hand washes the other in this world. And it wasn't his fault if he tried to earn his living as best he could. Poverty wasn't a sin.

But Lucia went red and white, her eyes swelled with tears, or she hid her face in her apron. After some time she didn't show herself outside the house, neither for mass, nor for confession, nor at Easter, nor at Christmas. In the kitchen she hid herself in the darkest corner, with her face dropped, huddled in the new dress her master had given her, wide around the waist.

Brasi consoled her with kind words. He put his arm around her neck, felt the fine stuff of her frock, and praised it. Those gold earrings were made for her. Anybody who is well dressed and has money in her pocket has no need to feel ashamed and walk with

her eyes down; above all when the eyes are as lovely as Neighbor Lucia's. The poor thing took courage by looking into his face with those same eyes, still overcome, and she stammered: "Do you mean it, Master Brasi? Do you still care for me?"

"Yes, yes, I do really!" replied Brasi, with his hand on his conscience. "But is it my fault if I'm not rich enough to marry you? If you'd got ten pounds, I'd marry you with my eyes shut."

Don Venerando had now taken to liking him also, and gave him his left-off clothes and his broken boots. When he went down into the cellar he gave him a good pot of wine, saying to him:

"Here, drink my health!"

And his fat belly shook with laughing, seeing the grimaces that Brasi made, and hearing him stuttering to Lucia, pale as a dead man: "The master is a gentleman, Neighbor Lucia! Let the neighbors cackle, they're all jealous, because they're dying with hunger, and they'd like to be in your shoes."

Santo, the brother, heard the gossip in the square some month or so later. He ran to his wife, staggered. Poor they had always been, but honored. Red-head was also overwhelmed, and she ran in dismay to her sister-in-law, who couldn't utter a word. But when she came back home, she was quite different, serene and with roses in her cheeks.

"If you did but see! A chest as high as this, full of white goods! and rings, and pendant earrings, and necklaces of fine gold. Then there are fifty dollars for the dowry. A real God's provision!"

"And what by that?" the brother kept saying from time to time, unable to take it all in. "At least she might have waited till our mother had closed her eyes!"

All this took place in the year of the snow, when a good many roofs fell in, and there was a great mortality among the cattle of the district, God preserve us!

At Lamia and on the Mount of Santa Margherita, as folks

saw that livid evening declining, heavy with ill-omened clouds, so that the oxen looked suspiciously behind them, and moored, all the people stood outside their huts to gaze far off toward the sea, with one hand over their eyes, not speaking. The bell of the Old Monastery, at the top of the village, was ringing to drive away the bad night, and on the Castle hillcrest there was a great swarming of goodwives, seen black against the pale sky-rim, watching the Dragon's Tail in the sky, a pitch-black stripe that smelled of sulfur, they said, and which meant it was going to be a bad night. The women made signs with their fingers to conjure him away, the dragon, and they showed him the little medal of the Madonna on their bare breasts, and spat in his face, making the sign of the cross upon themselves right down to their navels, and praying God and the souls in purgatory, and Santa Lucia, whose eve it was, to protect their fields, their cattle, and also their men, all live creatures that were outside the village. At the beginning of winter Carmenio had gone with the flock to Santa Margherita. His mother wasn't well that evening, and tossed in her bed, with her dilated eyes, and wouldn't keep quiet like she usually did, but wanted this, and wanted that, and wanted to get up, and wanted them to turn her over on to the other side. Carmenio had run around for a while, attending to her, trying to do something. Then he had posted himself by the bed, stupefied, with his hands clutching his hair.

The hut was across the stream, in the bed of the valley, between two great rocks that leaned over the roof. Opposite, the coast, seeming to stand on end, was beginning to fade in the darkness that was rising from the valley, naked and black with stones, and between the stones the white stripe of the road track lost itself. When the sun was setting the neighbors had come from the flock in the cactus grove, to see if the sick woman wanted anything; but she was lying quite still in her bit

of a bed, with her face upward and her nose going black, as if dusted with soot.

“A bad sign!” Herdsman Decu had said. “If I hadn’t got the sheep up above, and the bad weather that’s coming on, I wouldn’t leave you alone tonight. Call me, if there’s anything!”

Carmenio said yes, with his head leaning against the doorpost; but seeing him going away step by step, to be lost in the night, he had a great desire to run after him, to begin to shout, and tear his hair — to do he knew not what.

“If anything happens,” shouted Herdsman Decu from the distance, “run up to the flock in the cactus thicket, up there, there’s people there.”

The flock was still to be seen on the rocky height, skyward, in that dim of twilight which still gathered on the tops of the mountains, and penetrated the thickets of the cactus. Far, far away, toward Lamia and the plain, was heard the howling of dogs — waow! waow! waow! — the sound coming right up to there and making your bones turn cold.

Then the sheep suddenly were possessed and began to rush about in a mass in the enclosure, driven by a mad terror, as if they heard the wolf in the neighborhood; and at that frantic clanging of sheep bells, it seemed as if the shadows had become lit up with so many fiery eyes, all going around. Then the sheep stopped still, huddled close together, with their noses down to the ground, and the dog with one long and lamentable howl, left off barking, seated there on his tail.

“If I’d known,” thought Carmenio, “it would have been better to tell Herdsman Decu not to leave me alone.”

Outside, in the darkness, the bells of the flock were heard shuddering from time to time. Through the window hole you could see the square of the black doorway, black as the mouth of an oven; nothing else. And the coast away opposite and the

deep valley and the plain of Lamia, all was plunged in that bottomless blackness, so that it seemed as if what you saw was nothing but the noise of the torrent, away below, mounting up toward the hut, swollen and threatening.

If he had known this too he'd have run to the village before it got dark, to fetch his brother; and then of course by this time he'd have been there with him, and Lucia as well, and the sister-in-law.

Then the mother began to speak, but you couldn't make out what she said, and she kept grasping the bedclothes with her wasted hands.

"Mamma! Mamma! What do you want?" asked Carmenio. "Tell me what it is, I'm here with you!"

But the mother did not answer. She shook her head instead, as if to say no! no! she didn't want to. The boy put the candle under her nose and burst out crying with fear.

"Oh, Mamma! oh, Mamma!" whimpered Carmenio. "Oh, I'm all alone and I can't help you!"

He opened the door to call the folks from the flock among the cacti. But nobody heard him.

Everywhere there was a dense glimmer; on the coast, in the valley, and down on the plain — like a silence made of cotton wool. All at once came the sound of a muffled bell from far off — 'nton! 'nton! 'nton! — and it seemed to curdle in the snow.

"Oh, holiest Madonna!" sobbed Carmenio. "Whatever bell is that? Oh, you with the cactus sheep, help! Help! Holy Christians!" he began to shout.

At last, above there, at the top of the cactus hill, was heard a far-off voice, like the bell of Francoforte.

"Ooooh! — what's a-maaatter? what's a-maaatter?"

"Help, good Christians! Help, here at Shepherd Decu-u-u's — "

"Ooooh — follow the shee-eeep! — fo-o-ollow!"

“No! no! it isn’t the sheep — it *isn’t!*”

Just then the screech owl flew past and began to screech over the hut.

“There!” murmured Carmenio, crossing himself. “Now the screech owl has smelled the smell of dead people. Now my mamma is going to die!”

Having to stay alone in the cabin with his mother, who no longer spoke, made him want to cry. “Mamma, what’s a-matter? Mamma, tell me! Mamma, are you cold?” She did not breathe, her face was dark. He lit the fire between the two stones of the hearth, and sat watching how the boughs burned, how they made a flame and then breathed out as if they were saying something about it.

When he had been with the flocks at Resecone, the Francoforte man, as they sat up at night, had told tales of witches who ride on broomsticks, and do witchcraft over the flames of the hearth. Carmenio remembered even now how the farm-people had gathered to listen, with all their eyes open, in front of the little light hung to the pillar of the great dark millstone, and that not one of them had had the courage afterward to go and sleep in his own corner that evening.

Against these things he had the medal of the Madonna under his shirt, and the ribbon of Santa Agrippina tied around his wrist, till it had become black with wear. And in his pocket he had the reed whistle, which reminded him of summer evenings — *Yoo! Yoo!* — when they let the sheep into the stubble that is yellow as gold, and the grasshoppers explode in sound at the hour of noon, and the larks fall whistling to nestle behind the sods at sunset, when the scent of wild mint and marjoram wakes up. *Yoo! Yoo! Infant Jesu!* At Christmas, when he had gone to the village, that was how they had played for the novena in front of the little altar that was lit up and adorned with boughs of orange tree; and in front of the doors

of all the houses the children had been playing chuck-stone, the fine December sun shining on their backs. Then they had all set off for the midnight mass, in a crowd with the neighbors, colliding and laughing through the dark streets. Ah, why had he got this thorn in his heart now? And why didn't his mother say anything! It still wanted a long time to midnight. Between the stones of the unplastered walls it seemed as if there were eyes watching from every hole, looking into the hut, at the hearth, eyes black and frozen.

On a straw sack in a corner a jacket was thrown down, spread out long, and it seemed as if the sleeves were swelling out; and the devil with the Archangel Michael, in the image-card stuck on to the bed-head, gnashed his white teeth, with his hands in his hair, among the red zigzags of hell.

Next day, pale as so many corpses, arrived Santo, and Red-head with the children trailing after her, and Lucia who had no thought for concealing her condition, in that hour of anguish. Around the bed of the dead woman they tore their hair and beat their heads, and thought of nothing else. Then as Santo noticed his sister with so much stomach on her that it was shameful, he began saying in the midst of all the blubbering: "You might at least have let that poor woman close her eyes first, you might —"

And Lucia on her side:

"If I'd only known, if I'd only known! She shouldn't have gone short of doctor or druggist, now I've got fifty dollars of my own."

"She is in Paradise praying to God for us sinners," concluded Red-head. "She knows you've got your dowry and she's at peace, poor thing. Now Master Brasi will marry you without fail."