

Don Licciu Papa (1883)

By Giovanni Verga

The goodwives were spinning in the sun, and the fowls were scratching among the rubbish in front of the doorsteps, when suddenly there arose a squealing and a scampering all down the little street, as Uncle Maso was seen approaching from the distance, Uncle Maso the pig snatcher, with his noose in his hand; and all the fowls scuttled away squawking, as if they knew him.

Uncle Maso got a dime from the town council for every fowl, and half-a-dollar for every pig that he caught breaking the by-laws. He preferred the pigs. Therefore, seeing Goodwife Santa's little porker stretched out peacefully with its nose in the mire, he threw the running noose around its neck.

“Oh holy, holy Madonna! What are you doing, Uncle Maso?” cried Aunt Santa, pale as death. “For Mercy's sake, Uncle Maso, don't have me fined, it'll be the finish of me!”

Uncle Maso, the traitor, in order to gain time to get the young pig on to his shoulders, began to reel off pretty speeches to her.

“My dear good woman, what am I to do? It's the Town Council's orders. They won't have pigs in the street anymore. If I leave you this young sow I lose my own daily bread.”

Aunt Santa ran behind him like a madwoman, her hands clutching her hair, screaming all the time:

“Ah, Uncle Maso! don't you know she cost me a dollar at the fair of San Giovanni, and I care for her like the apple of my eye! Leave me my little pig, Uncle Maso, by the soul of those that are dead and gone! Come the New Year, with God's help she'll be worth seven dollars!”

Uncle Maso, with never a word, his head dropped, and his heart as hard as a stone, only minded where he put his feet, so as not to slip in the muck; the young pig over his shoulder twisting up to heaven and grunting. Then Aunt Santa, desperate, in order to save her pig fetched him a solemn kick in the rear, and sent him rolling.

The goodwives no sooner saw the pig snatcher sprawling in the mud than they were upon him with their distaffs and their wooden-soled slippers, eager to pay him out for all the pigs and fowls he had on his conscience. But at that moment up ran Don Licciu Papa with his sword-belt over his paunch, bawling from the background like one possessed, keeping out of reach of the distaffs.

“Clear the way! Clear the way for the Law!”

The law condemned Goodwife Santa to pay the fine and the costs, and in order to save her from prison they had to turn for protection to the baron, whose kitchen window looked on to the little street, and who rescued her by a miracle, demonstrating to the Court that it was not an instance of

rebellion, because that day the pig snatcher hadn't had his cap on with the town-council badge.

“You see now!” exclaimed the women in chorus. “It takes a saint to get into Paradise! Who was to know that about the cap?”

However, the baron wound up with a sermon: Those pigs and fowls had got to be cleared out of the street; the town council was quite right, the place was a pigsty.

After that, every time the baron's manservant emptied his dustpan into the street, on the heads of the neighbours, not a woman murmured. Only they lamented that the hens, shut up in the house to escape the fine, didn't rear good chicks anymore; and the pigs, tied by the leg to the bedpost, were like souls tortured in purgatory. Anyhow they used to sweep their streets themselves, before.

“All that muck would be so much gold for the Grasshopper fields,” sighed Farmer Vito. “If I'd got my bay mule yet, I'd wipe up the street with my own hands.”

And this also was a bit of Don Licciu Papa's work. He had come with the bailiff to seize the mule for debt, since Farmer Vito would never have let the bailiff by himself take the mule from the stable, no not if they'd killed him for it, he wouldn't, he'd rather have bitten off the fellow's nose and eaten it like bread. Then before the judge, who sat at the table like Pontius Pilate, when Farmer Venerando prosecuted him to recover the loan advanced on the half-profits, he couldn't find a word to say. The Grasshopper fields were fit for nothing but grasshoppers; the fool was himself, he had himself to blame if he'd come home from harvest empty-handed, and Farmer Venerando was quite right to want to be paid back, without all that talking and spinning things out, though that was what he'd paid a lawyer to talk for him for. But when it was over, and Farmer Venerando was going off gleefully, rocking inside his great boots like a fattened duck, he couldn't help asking the clerk if it was true that they were going to sell his mule.

“Silence!” interrupted the judge, who was blowing his nose before passing on to another case.

Don Licciu Papa woke up with a start on his bench, and cried, “Silence!”

“If you'd brought a lawyer, they'd have let you say something more,” Neighbor Orazio told him for his comfort.

In the piazza, in front of the town-hall steps, the crier sold his mule for him.

“Forty dollars for Neighbor Vito Guirri's mule! Forty dollars for a fine bay mule! Forty dollars!”

Neighbor Vito, sitting on the steps with his chin between his hands, wasn't going to let out a word about the mule's being old, and it's being over sixteen years that he'd worked her. And she stood there as happy as a bride, in her new halter. But the moment they'd really led her away, he went off his head, thinking of that usurer of a Farmer Venerando who was getting forty dollars out of him just for one year's half-profits on the Grasshopper fields, and the land wasn't worth as much to buy it outright, and without his mule he'd never be able to work it, and next year he'd be in debt again. And he began to shout like a maniac into Farmer Venerando's face:

“What shall you want of me when I've got nothing left? - Antichrist that you are!”

And he'd have liked to knock the baptism off his brow, if it hadn't been for Don Licciu Papa who

was there with his sword and his braided hat, and who began to shout as he drew back:

“Halt in the Law's name! Halt in the Law's name!”

“What law” squealed Neighbor Vito going home with the halter in his hand. “Law is made for them who've got money to spend.”

Which was what the herdsman Arcangelo knew, who, when he'd gone to law with his Reverence because of his bit of a house that his Reverence wanted to force him to sell to him, had everybody saying to him:

“Are you out of your mind going to law with his Reverence? It's the tale of the pitcher fighting with the stones. His Reverence with all his money will hire the best lawyer's tongue among them, and will bring you to poverty and craziness.”

His Reverence, since he'd got rich, had enlarged the paternal house, this way and that, like the hedgehog does when he swells himself out to drive his neighbors away from his hole. Now he'd widened the windows looking on to Shepherd Arcangelo's roof, and he said he needed the other man's house so as to build a kitchen above it and turn the window into a doorway.

“You see, my dear Neighbor Arcangelo, I can't manage without a kitchen! You must be reasonable!”

Neighbor Arcangelo didn't see it, and kept on saying he wanted to die in the house where he was born. As a matter of fact, he only came there of a Saturday; but the stones knew him, and if he thought of the village, when he was away on the wild pastures of Carramone, he never saw it as anything except that patched-up little doorway and that window without any glass.

“All right, all right,” said his Reverence to himself. “Pig-headed peasants! We've got to knock the sense in.”

And from his Reverence's window rained down broken pots, stones, and dirty water on Shepherd Arcangelo's roof, till the corner where the little bed stood was worse than a pigsty. If Shepherd Arcangelo shouted, his Reverence began to shout louder than he, from the roof above: Couldn't one keep a pot of basil on his windowsill nowadays? Wasn't a man free to water his own flowers?

Shepherd Arcangelo had a head sturdier than his own wethers, and he went to law. There came the judge, the clerk, and Don Licciu Papa, to see whether a man was free to water his own flowers or not, so of course on that day the flowers weren't there on the windowsill, and his Reverence had only to take the trouble to remove them every time the law was coming, and put them out again as soon as they'd turned their backs. As for the judge he couldn't spend his days playing watchman on Shepherd Arcangelo's roof, or patrolling up and down the narrow street; every visit he made was expensive.

Remained only to decide whether his Reverence's window should or should not have an iron grating, and the judge, the clerk and all the lot looked up with their spectacles on their noses, and took measurements so that you'd have thought it was a baron's roof, that bit of a flat moldy housetop. And his Reverence brought forth certain ancient rights for a window without a grating, and for a few tiles that projected out over the roof, till you could make nothing of it anymore, and poor Shepherd Arcangelo himself stared up in the air as if to find out whatever his roof could be guilty of. He lost his sleep at nights and the smile from his mouth; he bled himself in expenses, and

had to leave his flock in charge of the boy while he ran around after the judge and the bailiff. So of course the sheep began to die like flies, with the first cold of winter, which showed that the Lord was punishing him for falling out with the Church, so they said.

“Then you take the house,” he said at last to his Reverence, when after so many lawsuits and expenses they wouldn't even advance him the money to buy a rope to hang himself from one of the beams. He wanted to sling his saddlebag over his neck and go off with his daughter to live with the sheep, for he didn't want to see that accursed house again, while the world stood.

But then his other neighbor the baron came forward, saying that he too had windows and lean-over tiles above the roof of Shepherd Arcangelo, and seeing that his Reverence wanted to build a kitchen, he himself had to enlarge his store pantry, that the poor goatherd no longer knew whom his house did belong to. But his Reverence found the means to settle the quarrel with the baron, dividing the house of Shepherd Arcangelo between them like good friends, and seeing that the latter had this other obligation as well, the price of the house was reduced by a good quarter.

Nina, the daughter of Shepherd Arcangelo, when they had to leave the house and depart from the village, simply never stopped crying, as if her heart was fastened to those four walls and to the nails of the partitions. Her father, poor fellow, tried to console her as best he could, telling her that away up there, in the Caves of Carramone, you lived like a prince, without neighbors and pig snatchers. But the goodwives who knew the story winked among themselves, murmuring:

“Up at Carramone the young master won't be able to come to her, at evening, when Neighbor Arcangelo is with his sheep. That's why Nina is weeping like a fountain.”

When Neighbor Arcangelo got to know this he began to swear and shout:

“Hussy! Now who'll you get to marry you?”

But Nina wasn't thinking of getting anybody to marry her. She only wanted to stop where the young master was, so that she could see him every day at the window, as soon as he got up, and make him a sign to ask him if he was coming to see her that evening. And in this way Nina had fallen, with seeing the young master at the window every day, who had begun by laughing to her, and sending her kisses and the smoke from his pipe, and the neighbor women were bursting with jealousy. Then bit by bit love had come, so that now the girl had quite lost her senses, and she said straight and flat to her father:

“You go where you like. I shall stop where I am.”

And the young master had promised her he would look after her. Shepherd Arcangelo wasn't swallowing that, and he wanted to fetch Don Licciu Papa to take away his daughter by force.

“Anyhow when we've gone from here nobody will know our shames,” he said. But the judge told him that Nina had already reached years of discretion, and she was her own mistress to do as she pleased and chose.

“Ah! her own mistress?” stammered Shepherd Arcangelo. “And I'm master!” And the first time he met the young master, who blew smoke into his nose, he cracked his head like a nut with a wooden cudgel.

After they had tied him up fast, Don Licciu Papa came running up shouting: "Make way! Make way for the Law!"

They even gave him a lawyer to defend him before the judge.

"At least the law will cost me nothing this time," said Neighbor Arcangelo. The lawyer succeeded in proving that four and four make eight, that Shepherd Arcangelo hadn't done it on purpose, willfully seeking to murder the young master with a cudgel of wild pear-wood, but that the cudgel belonged to his profession, and was used by him to knock the rams on the head when they couldn't hear reason.

So he was only condemned to five years, Nina remained with the young master, the baron enlarged his store pantry, and his Reverence built a fine new house above that old place of Shepherd Arcangelo's, with a balcony and two green windows.