Liberty (1883)*

By Giovanni Verga

**This story is based on an actual incident in the "revolution" of 1860, when Garibaldi was in Sicily with the thousand.*

They unfurled a red-white-and-green handkerchief from the church tower, they rang the bells in a frenzy, and they began to shout in the village square, "Hurray for liberty!"

Like the sea in storm. The crowd foamed and swayed in front of the club of the gentry, and outside the town hall, and on the steps of the church - a sea of white stocking caps, axes and sickles glittering. Then they burst into the little street.

"Your turn first, baron! You who have had folks cudgeled by your estate keepers!"

At the head of all the people a witch, with her old hair sticking up, armed with nothing but her nails. "Your turn priest of the devil! for you've sucked the soul out of us!" "Your turn now, rich glutton, you're not going to escape no matter how fat you are with the blood of the poor!" "Your turn, police sergeant! you who never took the law on anybody except poor folks who'd got nothing!" "Your turn, estate keepers, who sold your own flesh and your neighbor's flesh for twenty cents a day!"

And blood smoked and went drunk. Sickles, hands, rags, stones, everything red with blood! The gentry! The gentry! Kill them all! Kill them all! Down with the gentry!

Don Antonio was slipping home by the short cuts. The first blow made him fall with his bleeding face against the causeway. "Why? Why are you killing me?" "You as well, the devil can have you!" A lame brat picked up the filthy hat and spat inside it. "Down with the gentry! Hurray for liberty! You, take that!" Then for his Reverence who used to preach hell for anybody who stole a bit of bread. He was just coming back from saying mass, with the consecrated Host inside his fat belly. "Don't kill me, I am in mortal sin!" Neighbor Lucia being the mortal sin; Neighbor Lucia whose father had sold her to the priest when she was fourteen years old, at the time of the famine winter, and she had ever since been filling the streets and the Refuge with hungry brats. If such dog's meat had been worth anything that day they'd have been able to stuff themselves with it, as the hacked it to pieces with their hatchets in the doorways of the houses and on the cobblestones of the street. Like the wolf when he falls famished on a flock of sheep, and never thinks of filling his belly, but just slaughters left and right with rage – Milday's son, who had run to see what was happening – the apothecary, while he was locking up shop as fast as he could - Don Paolo, who was coming home from the vineyard riding on his ass, with his lean saddlebags behind him. And he was wearing into the bargain a little old cap that his daughter had embroidered for him long ago, before the vines had taken the disease. His wife saw him fall in front of the street door, as she and her five children were waiting for him and for the handful of stuff for the soup that he had got in his saddlebags. “Paolo! Paolo!” The first fellow caught him in the shoulder with a hatchet cut. Another was on him with a sickle, and disemboweled him as he was reaching with his bleeding arm for the knocker.

But the worst was when the lawyer's son, a lad of eleven, blond as gold, fell no one knows how, overthrown in the crowd. His father had raised himself two or three times before he dragged himself aside into the filth, to die, calling to him: "Neddu! Neddu!" Neddu fled in terror, mouth and eyes wide open, unable to make a sound. They knocked him down; he also raised himself on one knee, like his father; the torrent passed over him; somebody put his great boot on the boy's cheek and smashed it in; nevertheless the lad still begged for mercy with his hands. He didn't want to die, no, not in the way he had seen his father killed; it broke his heart! The wood cutter out of pity gave him a great blow with the axe, using both hands, as if he had had to fell a fifty-year-old oak tree - and he trembled like a leaf. Somebody shouted, "Bah, he'd have been another lawyer."

No matter! Now they had their hands red with such blood, they'd got to spill the rest. All of 'em! All the gentry! It was no longer hunger, beatings, swindling that made their anger boil up again. It was innocent blood. The women most ferocious of all, waving their fleshless arms, squealing under the rags of their clothing, “You who came praying to the good God in a silk frock!” “You who thought yourself contaminated if you knelt beside poor folks! Take that! Take that!” In the houses, on the staircases, inside the alcoves, a tearing of silk and of fine linen. Oh the earrings upon bleeding faces, oh the golden rings upon hands that tried to ward off the hatchet strokes!

The baroness had had the great door barricaded: beams, wagons, full casks piled against it, and the estate keepers firing from the windows to sell their lives dear. The crowd bowed its head to the gunfire because it had no weapons to respond with. Because in those days it was death penalty for having firearms in your possession. Hurray for Liberty! And they burst in the great doors. Then into the courtyard, up the steps, dislodging the wounded. They left the estate keepers for the time. They would settle them latter. First they wanted the flesh of the baroness, flesh made of partridges and good wine. She ran from room to room with her baby at her breast, all disheveled – and the rooms were many. The crowd was heard howling along the twistings of the passages, advancing like a river in flood. The oldest son, sixteen years of age, also with fair white flesh still, was pushing the door with his trembling hands, crying: “Mama! Mama!” At the first rush they sent the door down on top of him. He clung to the legs that trod him down. He cried no more. His mother had taken refuge on the balcony, clasping her baby close, shutting its mouth with her hand so that it should not cry, mad. The other son wanted to defend her with his body, glaring, as if he had a hundred hands, clutching all those axes by the blades. They separated them in a flash. One man seized her by the hair, another by her hips, another by her dress, lifting her above the balcony rail. The charcoal man tore the infant baby from her arms. The other brother saw nothing but red and black. They trampled him down, the ground his bones with iron-shod heels; he had set his teeth in a hand that was squeezing his throat, and he never let go. Hatchets couldn't strike in the heap, they hovered flashing in the air.

And in that mad carnival of the month of July, above all the drunken howling of the fasting crowd, the bell of God kept on ringing frantically, until evening, with no midday, no avemaria, like in the land of the Turks. Then they began to disband, tired with the slaughter, quietly, slinkingly, every one fleeing from his companion. Before nightfall all doors were shut, in fear, and in every house the lamp was burning. Along the little streets no sound was heard save that of the dogs, which went prying in the corners, then a dry gnawing of bones, in the bright moonlight that washed over everything, and showed the wide-open big doors and the open windows of the deserted houses.

Day broke: a Sunday with nobody in the square, and no mass ringing. The sexton had burrowed into his hiding hole; there were no more priests. The first-comers that began to gather on the sacred threshold looked one another in the face suspiciously; each one thinking of what his neighbor must have on his conscience. Then, when they were a fair number, they began to murmur: "We can't be without mass, and on a Sunday, like dogs!" The club of the *Gentry* was barricaded up, and they didn't know where to go to get their masters' orders for the week. From the church tower still dangled the red-white-and-green handkerchief, flaccid, in the yellow heat of July. And as the shade diminished slowly outside the church-front, the crowd clustered all in one corner. Between two miserable houses of the square, at the bottom of a narrow street that sloped steeply downward, you could see the fields yellowish on the plain, and the dark woods on the slopes of Etna. Now they are going to share up those fields and woods among themselves. each one was calculating to himself, on his fingers, how much he should get for his share, and was looking askance at his neighbors. Liberty meant that everybody should have his share – you Nino Bestia and yon Ramurazzo would have liked to make out that they must carry on the bossy tricks of the gentry! If there was no surveyor to measure the land, and no lawyer to put it on paper, everybody would be going at it tooth and nail! And if you booze your share at the public house, then afterward we've got to start sharing all over again – thief here and thief there. Now that there was Liberty, anybody who wanted to eat enough for two ran the risk of being done in like those there gentry! The woodcutter brandished his fist in the air as if he still grasped the axe.

The next day they heard that the general was coming to deal out justice; which news made folks tremble. They saw the red shirts of their own soldiers climbing slowly up the ravine toward the village; if you had rolled down rock you could have squashed them all. But nobody stirred. The women screamed and tore their hair. And the dark-faced men with long beards only sat on the top of the hill with their hands between their thighs watching those tired boys come up, bent beneath their rusty rifles, and that little general on his great black horse, in front of them all, alone.

The general made them carry straw into the church, and put his boys to sleep like a father. In the morning, before dawn, if they weren’t up at the sound of the bugle, he rode into church on his horse, swearing like a Turk. That was a man! And on the spot he ordered five or six of them to be shot. Pippo, the dwarf, Pizzannello, the first ones they laid hold of. The woodcutter, while they were making him kneel against the cemetery wall, wept like a child because of certain words his mother had said to him, and because of the cry she had uttered when they tore him from her arms. From afar off, in the remotest alleys of the village as you sat behind your closed door, you could hear those gunshots firing one after the other, like cannon crackers at holiday time.

And then came the real judges, gentlemen in spectacles perched upon mules, done up with the journey, complaining still of their fatigue, while they were examining the accused in the refectory of the monastery, sitting on one hip on their seats, and saying aha! every time they changed the side. A trial that would never come to an end. They took the guilty over away to the city, on foot, chained two by two, between two files of soldiers with cocked muskets. Their women followed them running down the long country roads, across the fallow land, through the cactus thickets and the vineyards and the golden-colored wheat, tired out, limping, calling out their names every time the road made a bend and they could see the faces of the prisoners. At the city they shut them up in the great prison that was high and vast as a monastery, all pierced with iron-barred windows; and if the women wished to see their men, it was only on Mondays in presence of the warders, behind the iron grating. And the poor fellows got yellower and yellower in that everlasting shadow, never seeing the sun. Every Monday they were more taciturn, and they hardly answered, they complained even less. Other days if the women roved in the square around the prison, the sentinels threatened them with their guns. And then never knowing what to do, where to find work in the town, nor how to earn bread. The bed in the stables cost two cents; the white bread they swallowed in a gulp did not fill their stomachs; and if they crouched down in the doorway of a church, to pass the night there, the police arrested them. One by one they went back home, first the wives, then the mothers. One good-looking lass lost herself in the town and was never heard of again. All the others belonging to the village had come back to do the same as they had done before. The gentry couldn't work their lands with their own hands, and the poor folks couldn't live without the gentry. So they made peace. The apothecary's orphan son stole Neli Pirru’s wife, and it seemed to him a proper thing to do, to revenge himself on the one who had killed his father. And when the woman had qualms now and then, and was afraid that her husband when he came out of prison would cut her face, the apothecary’s son replied, “Don’t be afraid, he won’t come out." Nowadays nobody thought of them; unless it was some mother, some old father, when their eyes wandered toward the plain where the city lay, or on Sundays when they saw the others talking over their affairs quietly with the gentry, in front of the club, with their caps in their hands; and they convinced themselves that rags must suffer in a wind.

The case lasted three years, no less; three years of prison without ever seeing the sun. So that the accused seemed like so many dead men out of the tomb, every time they were conducted fettered to the court. Whoever could manage it had come down from the village, witnesses, relatives, people full of curiosity, like a holiday, to see their fellow villagers, after such a long time, crowded together in the chicken coop of the prisoner's dock - and real chickens you became, inside there! and Neli Pirru had to see the apothecary's lad face to face, the fellow who had become his relation underhand! They made them stand up one by one. "'What is your name?' And each one answered for himself, name and surname and what he had done. The lawyers fenced away with their speeches, in wide, loose sleeves, getting beside themselves, foaming at the mouth, suddenly wiping themselves calm with a white pocket-handkerchief, and snuffing up a pinch of snuff. The judges dozed behind the lenses of their spectacles, which froze your heart. Facing were seated twelve gentry in a row, tired, bored, yawning, scratching their beards or gabbling among themselves. For sure they were telling one another what a marvelous escape it had been for them that they weren't gentry of that village up there, when the folks had been making liberty. And those poor wretches opposite tried to read their faces. Then they went away to confabulate together, and the accused men waited white-faced, with their eyes fixed on the closed door. As they came in again, their foreman, the one who spoke with his hand on his stomach, was almost as pale as the prisoners, and he said, "On my honor and on my conscience - !"

The charcoal man while they were putting the handcuffs on him again, stammered: "Where are you taking me? To the galleys? Oh why? I never got so much as half a yard of land! If they'd told me what liberty was like - !"