Frugal Supper in the Kitchen

Now Lady Ester and Lady Ruth were sitting, humble and black like two nuns with white bands on their heads and their hands under their aprons, thinking about the far away Noemi, about the far away Giacinto.

Their supper had been frugal: a milk soup that didn’t upset the stomach and that kept the mind bright and clear, like the wide spring sky. By the way, sometimes lady Ester had a sort of contrition shiver, an almost secret thought of guilt.

Gacintino (…) the letter written in secret. Next to them, sitting on the floor with her back to the wall and her arms around her knees, Grixenda laughed while watching the boy who was playing the accordion. In the hut nearby, the relatives with whom she had arrived at the festival were eating sitting on the ground around a pannier that was open like a tablecloth; and while one of them was cuddling a baby who was falling asleep, shaking his soft hands, the other called the girl. (…)

Noemi was setting the table, silent: here was the same basket, darkened by the time, smoothed by use; here was the same bread and the same filling. Efix was eating and narrating, using uncertain words, veiled with shy lies. But after that, he had thrown the crumbs on the floor and what
was left into the glass, since the heart always wants its little part of nourishing.

(from the novel *Reeds in the Wind*, 1913)

In an interview with Grazia Deledda, when she was already popular, a reporter asked her which of her books she felt most affection for: with no hesitation, she answered *Reeds in the Wind*. The novel was published in serial form in a magazine, like almost all the works written by the most popular authors of the time. It was soon a great success, with both the public and critics. It also became the subject of one of the first television dramas on RAI, unforgettable for some of its performers.

Sardinia, as it was described there, appeared archaic and pretty far from the farming habits and traditions in the rest of Italy. The story narrated in *Reeds in the Wind* is, on the other hand, set in the same period as the War in Libya, which is totally parallel to the year the book was published.

The three Pintor sisters, unmarried because they are too noble and poor to find a husband in the village of Galte, overwhelmed by malaria and misery, host their nephew Giacinto in their house; he will bring emotional disarray among his aunts. The central character is Efix, the last old servant, loyal to the Pintor ladies, who atones for his double sin: having fallen in love with the little mistress of the house, Lia; and having – though accidentally – killed his master, Don Zane, to save her.
The public and critical success gained by *Reeds in the Wind* was great, and maybe even Palazzeschi with his *The Materassi Sisters* was indebted to the Deleddian work.

In the extracts reported here, I wanted to underline how poor the Sardinian dinner table was, in a supper made of bread and milk, while people are gathered in the *cumbissias*, little houses next to the rural sanctuary.

Later, though, as the most natural Sardinian tradition requires, even in the poor house of the Pintors, a guest must be honored. And the honor dedicated to him is food. Here is Ester, the “good” aunt, who makes the white – special – bread, while waiting for her nephew. Finally, the old Efix, after his wandering as a beggar among country churches, comes back to his master’s house and advances a pathetic lie, claiming that he had been in America to work at the digging of the Panama Canal. Efix is also treated as a guest, not as an old servant any more. Ester always insists that he eat in the kitchen, the very same kitchen where the reconciliation of different social roles is possible; the very same kitchen where Efix, lying in front of the lit fireplace, will die on the day of his mistress Noemi’s wedding.