The Festival Lunch

And he came back into the kitchen, followed by the guest, while Annesa, sad and sarcastic, was leaning before the fire, and she lightly hit an egg on the stone that served as a hearth.

Rosa heavily stepped down from the cart and came back inside, curious to know what was in the basket.

In the room of the old asthmatic man, which was also used as a dining room, the table was set for four people: Lady Rachele placed another piece of cutlery, and the guest went over to Uncle Zua.

“How are things, how are things?” he asked him, looking at him with curiosity.

“The tavern is open!” muttered Annesa, but she went to Don Simone, to tell him that his friend’s godson had asked for hospitality, and the old nobleman’s answer was just to place another piece of cutlery on the table.

But the new guest wanted to stay in the kitchen, and as soon as Annesa put a basket of bread, cheese, and lard in front of him, he started eating in a voracious way. He had to be very poor: his clothes were almost miserable, and his big, sad eyes were like the tired eyes of a sick man. Annesa looked at him and felt her spite fall. After all, since the Decherchis insisted on opening their house to everybody, it
was better to feed the poor ones than the rich spongers like that Ballore Spanu.

“Here it is, eat this trout,” she said, offering a part of her dinner to him. “Now I’ll also give you something to drink.”

“Will God pay it to you, my dear sister?” he answered while eating.

“Are you here for the festival?”

“Yes, I came here to sell spurs and bridles.” Annesa poured him something to drink.

“Will God pay it to you, my dear sister?” (…)

She came back into the dining room, and after the trout, she served fried eggs with onions, and at the end, a flat bread of dough and fresh cheese.

“We weren’t expecting guests,” Lady Rachele said to excuse herself, addressing Ballore Spanu with visible humiliation. “Please excuse us then, Ballore, if we are treating you badly.”

“You are treating me like a prince,” the guest answered, and he kept eating and drinking with joy.

Also, the two old men were joking. Don Simone was, or seemed to be, happy and serene, as Ballore had always known him. In Uncle Cosimu’s laugh, on the other hand, some sad note screeched. And the old asthmatic man, who slowly chewed the rosy pulp of a trout, took part in the conversation, and he giggled when the guest talked about Paulu. (…)

“Here, let’s go this way: let’s go into the big kitchen.”
They entered the big kitchen, where the festival promoters were preparing a Homeric banquet.

“Ohè, Miale Corbu, here we are,” Uncle Castigu proudly shouted, advancing at Paulu’s side.

The Great Prior, that is the president of the committee for the festivals, seemed to pop out of a cloud of thick and fat smoke, which covered the kitchen background like a veil. And he was a man worthy of being surrounded by clouds, like a wild god: a sort of giant, dressed in a red suit vest and a pair of brache di saja - woolen pants,- so wide it looked like a short skirt hanging over the black woolen gaiters. Under the long cap, folded on the top of his head, and between two bands of long black hair, oiled with grease, his face was earthy red, with a hooked nose, a jetting chin, a reddish wavy beard: he seemed to be carved in clay. He smiled, almost touched, since Paulu Decherchi honored that gathering of simple and poor shepherds with his visit. He led the young man through the kitchens and the rooms, letting him look at everything, as if he were a stranger.

“A good festival, this year?” Paulu asked, looking around.

“Not bad. There are fifty promoters, and another hundred shepherds have helped with the festival, bringing a sheep and a measure of wheat each.”

In the big hearths, oak trunks were burning, and in the copper cauldrons, whole sheep were being cooked. Some men, sitting on the ground, with their faces alight and their eyes watery from the smoke, slowly made whole gigots of ram roll over the ambers, pierced by long wooden skewers.
A huge amount of meat appeared red on the benches set along the walls; and in the wooden and cork containers, the guts were still steaming. Here and there were heaps of black and yellowish skins of the hundred and more sheep gutted to celebrate the little Saint Basilio, guardian of Barunei, in a respectable way.

While Miale Corbu was leading Paulu to a sort of covered loggia, where a woman was serving coffee and liquors to the people who deigned to visit the Prior, Uncle Castigu introduced Rosa and Annesa to the rooms next to the kitchen. In one of these rooms, the men had to have lunch; in another, women and children; in a third one, called the room of sugar almonds, there were cakes; in another one, bread. And in every room, low and smoky, strange shapes of bearded men fidgeted, preparing cutting boards and knives for the banquet.

A big and burly man, with a thick reddish beard, entered the bread room at that moment. He was holding a slice of boiled meat, still steaming, in one hand, and a pocketknife: and sometimes he tore a bite with his teeth, and if some tendons were too resistant, he cut them with his knife, without pulling the meat out of his mouth. And he chewed with voracity, while his dull, blue eyes, bright and cold, expressed a feral delight.

“Yes, I remember,” Annesa said. “Last year, I passed by while you were having lunch, and you looked like a lot of wolves. Each of you had a cutting board full of meat on his knees, and while eating a slice, you looked at the next one. It was as like you had never seen this grace of God.”
“It is a festival: we must eat,” uncle Castigu said, without offence. “We eat, and we feed others. That’s it!” (…)

She went out of a little door that opened across the bread room, and the servant followed her. On that side, the place was almost deserted: only some beggars, crouched among the rocks and the bushes, were devouring the bread and meat that the Prior had ordered distributed to them. Precisely at that point, where the mountain path started, the old blind man, who had led Annesa to the village, had died. She didn’t remember anything of the mysterious event, but every time she had to go through that place, she had the impression she saw that old dead beggar again, and she felt a confused feeling of anguish and humiliation.

(from the novel L’edera, 1906)