Lunch of the Poor

Every year, Donna Rachele had called a few women from the neighborhood to help Annesa to prepare the lunch for the poor. (…)

For years and years, perhaps even centuries, a Lady Decherchi fulfilled the sacred obligation to serve with her hands “six modest poor, possibly hidden in poverty.”

And Donna Rachele had always been opposed to the sale of the tanca burdened with that tax, precisely because she had cherished the pitiful ceremony.

So the tanca had remained the last one, but now we had to resign ourselves to the inexorable violence of events. Patience. Paulu had not come back yet, and he was the last hope of Donna Rachele and his grandparents. (…)

Then came the other guests, of whom one was very young, blind since childhood. Don Simone sat down at the table with the poor, something he had never done before, and he wanted Rosa at his side.

“Donna Rachele” cried, joking, “we’re ready. But this year, instead of six, you invited seven poor people, or rather seven and a half.”

Rigid and pale, in her black costume, Donna Rachele entered, carrying a large plate full of macaroni; she smiled, but when she saw her old father-in-law sitting among the
poor diners, she shook; and bitter tears moistened her eyes. (…)

When the widow came in, carrying the roast, everyone realized that she had changed her appearance: an almost febrile joy animated her gaze, words of love and sweetness came out of her slightly colored lips.

(from the novel *L’edera*, 1906)

*L’Edera* is one of Deledda’s luckiest novels. Its title refers to the characteristic of the plant, in that “where it attacks it dies.” So is Annesa, “the daughter of the soul,” who is an orphan taken home by the noble Decherchi family, but her “parents” then exploit her as a servant. Annesa loves her master Paulu, who remains a widower and who squanders the family fortune. For him, she kills her old Uncle Zua, a rich, asthmatic relative, whose legacy she hopes will save her lover from ruin. For Annesa, there will be only remorse as expiation of sin.

The first of these passages remembers the custom of the Sardinian people of offering hospitality to relatives and friends on the patron saint’s holidays. In fact, in the agropastoral society, there were no hotels, and hospitality for eating and sleeping was a courtesy that was exchanged.

The dinner that Annesa offers her guests is considered poor, as she prepares the table with the products available in the countryside and in the rivers: the egg cooked directly on the grill of the fireplace or fried with onions; the trout with
pink meat, which is rich in the mountain rivers of Sardinia, focaccia, and fresh cheese.

The feast of the patron saint Saint Basilio is at its peak. The eldest prior, that is the president of the committee of fifty shepherds who were in charge of preparing the banquet, is honored by the visit of the nobleman Decherchi. Here are entire rooms full of provisions: the room of the bread, the room of the confetti, that is, of the sweets from bakery, while in the open air, the lambs are skinned and roasted. The Sardinian diet is essentially based on meat, roasted meat.

As in other stories, this feast of Saint Basilio does not forget the poor, to whom the prior has bread and meat distributed.

I close the series of quotations from L’edera with the reference to an authentic feudal “wreck” that is sometimes found in the folds of contracts of Sardinian landowners. The Decherchi are almost in ruins; the last tanca, that is the last farm, that the mistress does not want to sell, is the one on which for centuries the burden of the lunch of the poor has fallen: macaroni and roast meat, served on fine dishes and silver cutlery for six people chosen from the truly needy people of the village. A sign of humiliation (hence the unique “tax” paid for the tank) was precisely the mistress who was to serve at the table. Donna Rachele willingly accepted this burden, because she hoped it would, mysteriously, help their ruined economic situation.