The Bread in the Oven

As soon as it got cold, towards the end of November, the poorest men of the village – the ones who weren’t even servants, who didn’t have wheat to sow, and who didn’t have fire either – gathered in the little room at the entrance of the hut where Maria Franchisca made and sold, at a very low price, a dark bread mixed with barley and wheat flour. And leaning against the wall, or sitting on the ground, having bought and eaten a loaf, they lingered until evening, and even then they couldn’t make up their minds and leave.

Some of them brought some filling, a herring or a piece of goat cheese, white and hard like marble, and also wine, in a little black pumpkin, which was well hidden under their armpits. They drank and fell asleep.

The secret is that in the little unpaved entrance, without a window, lit only by the brightness of the oven that was on in the nearby kitchen, and by the light of the door that was sometimes opened and closed, there was a pleasant warmth, the sweetness of a nest.

When the door was completely open, you could see, across the yard in front of the little house, the skyline of the black mountains, hooded with the ermine of the first snow. From up there, the wind came down galloping like a wild horse, slamming against the house and making it shake. And it pushed the smoke from the oven into the kitchen again,
intensifying little Maria Franchisca’s bad mood and stubborn cough. Then she looked out of the door, complaining with few but rude sentences against the clients who were loitering inside. The cough cut her words short, and some of the indiscreet patrons left for pity, to avoid making her angry and therefore worsening her cough. Two or three, however, always stayed there, dumb and quiet, withdrawing into the corners like spiders, and they didn’t leave until evening.

The woman left them alone and in peace, and she went back to her chores. At that point, you didn’t hear anything but the sound of the wind outside, continuous and monotone like the roar of the sea; and in the kitchen, the tapping of the peel in the oven and the murmur of the flame.

Through the threshold, the men saw the little lady, minute and gentle like a child, and the huge baker woman, black, toasted by the oven heat, going to and from, dragging the baskets, taking the bread out of the oven and cleaning the ash from it with a bunch of mallow leaves. Next to the door, a little basket of hot bread exhaled a scent of hay. The front door was sometimes opened, and some woman was pushed inside by the living force of the wind, entering with her bloated skirt, going straight to choose the bread and make her hands warm with it, finally handing out a coin that Maria Franchisca shoved into her pocket, without even looking at it.

(from the short story *Il padrone*, in the collection *Il fanciullo nascosto*, 1915)
The text describes Maria Franchisca putting the bread into the oven, but it also offers to the writer the possibility of describing an anthropological feature, typical of the agropastoral economy of her homeland, where still not everything is fit for sale. Therefore, even though Maria Franchisca sells her bread, when she meets those who can’t pay, she lets herself be involved in a sort of rough charity.