Orphans’ Lunch

He recognized the gentleman he had seen on the train, Don Salvator Angelo, pale and fat. What did he come to do? She childishly thought, “He found out I’m a widow and he came looking for me (...) like in the old days.” And remembering that she was almost old, now, dumb and torn, she felt the need to laugh.

“He can see how I am!” she murmured, crossing her arms on her breast, as if to hide her lacerated corset, but he put a finger on his lips, and she in turn, realizing that Antonietta was approaching, no longer acknowledged the mysterious lord.

And he went quickly to the fireplace, sat down, and laid the yellow box next to him.

“Well, what new ones? Tell me.”

She began to tell, and at moments she cried, at moments she laughed, with her carefree and happy laughter that still bloomed on her face as roses bloom on the ruins: but more than the story, the man looked after the curious and anxious children who had gathered around her again, and observing those beautiful and wild heads, those black and dusty curls, the reddish hair, and those yellow braids to which the reflection of the sun of the flame gave golden tones, those black eyes, and those greenish eyes that looked at him
fascinated, giving him in turn a charm of joy and sadness together, he thought:

“If I married her, all these rascals would be mine”; and he thought he saw a beautiful dining room worthy of the bourgeoisie, with the Christmas tree on the table, and all those children dressed in lace and velvet, and that beautiful blonde with the eyes of a hesitant cat standing on a chair, reciting a poem on the occasion.

No, it was better this way: it was more picturesque, more romantic and also more comfortable. And suddenly the black gentleman took off his glove and stretched his finger to a dark face full of pleasure within which seemed to spark a great, mischievous joy.

“You rascal, what is your name?”

“Murru Giovanni Maria, or even Bellia.”

“Are you going to school?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“In Bonifai?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Even when it’s raining or snowing?”

“I don’t care!” Bellia said with a bold accent. Driven by the woman’s hand, he had planted himself in front of the foreigner, while his brothers and cousins looked at him and looked at each other, barely holding back the rice: laughter of envy, as we know. But then the black man turned to the whole company.

“Did you have dinner?”

In response, some people yawned.
“By chance, would you like to eat something while you wait for this real Battista? Murru Giovanni Maria, help me open this box. Slowly, slowly! This is what you find at the station in Bonifai, which is not the station in London. Oh, it’s better to sit here at the table.”

“What are you doing? Don’t bother! So you get dirty!”

The woman screamed, running here and there confused.

“Calm down! That’s it.” (…)

Like flies around the honey pot, the heads of the children crowned the hem of the table: and on this, as in fairy tales at the touch of the magic wand, many good things appeared. Even pears, yes, even grapes, yes in that age! Even a yellow bottle with a golden collar!

“I like black wine,” proclaimed Bellia, and the woman yelled: “Brazen, brash!” but the black man said: “you’re right!”

(from the novel *Il Natale del Consigliere*, from the collection *Chiaroscuro*, 1912)

This story presents us, once again, with a Sardinia risen from the grip of need. On the other hand, with the advent of the Kingdom of Italy, Sardinia experienced new taxes, especially the compulsory leverage that took away arms and work from the poorest.

An article in the newspaper of Sassari, *La Nuova Sardegna*, titled, “At the End of the Century, Sardinia at Auction,” described the worrying phenomenon of the mass sale of rural land by those who could only cope with taxes in
this way. But often, the sale of the countryside also meant entrance into poverty. Between the late nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, therefore, Sardinia had its highest level of emigration, and also a disturbing resurgence of banditry.

A luxury emigrant is the protagonist of the story *The Christmas of the Counselor*. It tells of the return to the island of a Sardinian who has made his fortune on the continent, becoming a counselor in the public administration. He found out that Antonietta, the lover of his youth, has become a widow, and she is a toll clerk at a railroad crossing. He goes to visit her, and he generously feeds Antonietta’s children, who have been orphaned.

I would like to underline how, because of the poverty of the time, even pears and grapes became real delicacies, “fairytale” things, as if they had sprung up out of the house by the touch of a magic wand!