

AND YOU FEEL YOU COULD touch it with your hand — as if it smoked up from the fat earth, there, everywhere, round about the mountains that shut it in, from Agnone to Mount Etna capped with snow — stagnating in the plain like the sultry heat of June. There the red-hot sun rises and sets, and the livid moon, and the *Puddara* that seems to float through a sea of exhalations, and the birds and the white marguerites of spring, and the burned up summer; and there the wild duck in long black files fly through the autumn clouds, and the river gleams as if it were of metal, between the wide, lonely banks that are broken here and there, scattered with pebbles, and in the background the Lake of Lentini, like a mere, with its flat shores, and not a boat, not a tree on its sides, smooth and motionless. By the lake bed the

oxen pasture at will, forlorn, muddied up to the breast, hairy. When the sheep bell resounds in the great silence, the wagtails fly away, noiselessly, and the shepherd himself, yellow with fever, and white as well with dust, lifts his swollen lids for a moment, raising his head in the shadow of the dry reeds.

And truly the malaria gets into you with the bread you eat, or if you open your mouth to speak as you walk, suffocating in the dust and sun of the roads, and you feel your knees give way beneath you, or you sink discouraged on the saddle as your mule ambles along, with its head down. In vain the villages of Lentini and Francoforte and Paternò try to clamber up like strayed sheep on to the first hills that rise from the plain, and surround themselves with orange groves, and vineyards, and evergreen gardens and orchards; the malaria seizes the inhabitants in the depopulated streets, and nails them in front of the doors of their houses whose plaster is all falling with the sun, and there they tremble with fever under their brown cloaks, with all the bed blankets over their shoulders.

Down below, on the plain, the houses are rare and sad-looking, beside the roads wasted by the sun, standing between two heaps of smoking dung, propped up by dilapidated sheds, where the change-horses wait with extinguished eyes, tied to the empty manger. Or by the shore of the lake, with the decrepit bough of the inn sign hung over the doorway, the great bare rooms, and the host dozing squatted on the doorstep, with his head tied up in a kerchief, spying round the deserted country every time he wakes up, to see if a thirsty traveler is coming. Or else what looks like little huts of white wood, plumed with four meager, gray eucalyptus trees, along the railway that cuts the plain in two like a hatchet cleft, where the locomotive flies whistling as the autumn wind, and where at night are ocruscations of fiery sparks. Or finally here and there, at the boundaries of the farmlands marked by a little

stone pillar very roughly squared, the farm places with their roofs shoved up from outside, with their door frames collapsing, in front of the cracked threshing floors, in the shade of the tall ricks of straw where the hens sleep with their heads under their wings, and the donkey lets his head hang, with his mouth still full of straw, and the dog rises suspiciously, and barks hoarsely at the stone that falls out from the plaster, at the firefly that flickers past, at the leaf that stirs in the inert countryside.

At evening, as soon as the sun sinks, sunburned men appear in the doorways, wearing big straw hats and wide canvas drawers, yawning and stretching their arms; and half-naked women, with blackened shoulders, suckling babies that are already pale and limp, so that you can't imagine that they'll ever get big and swarthy and romp on the grass when winter comes again, and the yard floor will be green once more, and the sky blue, and the country all around laughing in the sun. And you can't imagine where all the people live who go to mass on Sundays, or why they live there, all those who come to the little church surrounded by cactus hedges, from ten miles around, from as far as ever the clanging of the little cracked bell can be heard over the endless plain.

However, wherever there is malaria there is earth blessed by God. In June the ears of wheat hang weighted down, and the furrows smoke as if they had blood in their veins the moment the ploughshare enters them in November. And then those who reap and those who sow must fall like ripe ears as well, for the Lord has said, "In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread." And when the sweats of fever leave some one of them stiff upon the mattress of maize sheathes, and there's no need anymore of sulfate or of decoction of eucalyptus, they put him on the hay cart, or across an ass's pack saddle, or on a ladder, or any way they can, with a sack over his face, and they

take him to bury him by the lonely little church, under the thorny cacti whose fruit no one for that reason eats. The women weep in a cluster, and the men stand looking on, smoking.

So they had carried away the estate keeper of Valsavoia, who was called Farmer Croce, after he'd been swallowing sulfate and eucalyptus decoction for thirty years. In spring he was better, but at autumn, when the wild ducks passed again, he put his kerchief on his head and showed himself not oftener than every other day in the doorway; till he was reduced to skin and bone, and had a big belly like a drum, so that they called him the Toad, partly because of his rude, savage manner, and partly because his eyes had become livid and stuck out of his head. He kept on saying before he died, "Don't you bother, the master will see after my children!" And with his wondering eyes he looked them one after another in the face, all those who stood around the bed, the last evening, when they put the candle under his nose. Uncle Menico the goat-herd, who understood those things, said that his liver must be as hard as a stone, and weighed five pounds. But somebody added:

"Well, now he needn't worry about it! He's got fat and rich at his master's expense, and his children don't stand in need of anybody! Do you think he took all that sulfate and put up with all that malaria for thirty years, just to please the master?"

Neighbor Carmine, the host by the lake, had lost all his five children one after the other in the same way, three boys and two girls! Never mind about the girls! But the boys died just when they were getting old enough to earn their bread. So now he was used to it; and as the fever got the last boy under, after having harassed him for two or three years, he didn't spend another farthing, neither for sulfate nor for decoctions, but drew off some good wine and set himself to make all the good fish stews he could think of, to provoke the appetite of

the sick youth. He went fishing specially in the mornings, and came back laden with mullet and eels as thick as your arm, and when it was ready he stood before the bed with tears in his eyes and said to his son, "There you are, eat that!" And the rest of the fish Nanni the carter took to town to sell.

"The lake gives, and the lake takes away," said Nanni, seeing Neighbor Carmine weeping in secret. "What's the good, brother?"

The lake had given him good wages. And at Christmas, when eels fetch a good price, they used to have merry suppers before the fire, in the house by the lake, macaroni, sausages, everything you could think of, while the wind howled outside like a wolf that is cold and hungry. And in that way those that were left behind consoled themselves for the ones that were dead. But little by little they were wasting away, so that the mother grew bent like a hook with heartbrokenness, and the father, who was big and fat, was always on the doorstep, so that he needn't see those empty rooms, where his boys used to sing and work. The last one absolutely didn't want to die, and cried and grew desperate when the fever seized him, and even went and threw himself into the lake out of fear of death. But his father could swim, and fished him out again, and shouted at him that that cold bath would bring back the fever worse than ever.

"Ah," sobbed the youth, clutching his hair with his hands, "there's no hope for me, there's no hope for me!" "Just like his sister Agatha, who didn't want to die because she was a bride," observed Neighbor Carmine in private to his wife, sitting on the side of the bed; and she, who for some time now had left off weeping, nodded assent, bent as she was like a hook.

But she, though she was so reduced, and her big fat husband, they both had tough skins, and lived on alone to mind the house. The malaria doesn't finish everybody. Sometimes there's one who will live to be a hundred, like Cirino the simpleton,

who had neither king nor kingdom, nor wit nor wish, nor father nor mother, nor house to sleep in, nor bread to eat, and everybody knew him for forty miles around, since he went from farm to farm, helping to tend the oxen, to carry the manure, to skin the dead cattle, and do all the dirty jobs; and got kicks and a bit of bread; he slept in the ditches, on the edges of the fields, under the hedges, or under the sheds for the standing cattle; and lived by charity, straying around like a dog without a master, with two ends of old drawers held together with bits of string on his thin black legs; and he went singing at the top of his voice under the sun that beat down on his bare head, yellow as saffron. He neither took sulfate anymore, nor medicines, nor did he catch the fever. A hundred times they had found him stretched out across the road, as if he were dead, and picked him up; but at last the malaria had left him, because it could do no more with him. After it had eaten up his brain and the calves of his legs, and had got into his belly till it was swollen like a water bag, it had left him as happy as an Easter day, singing in the sun better than a cricket. The simpleton liked best to stand in front of the stables at Valsavoia, because people passed by, and he ran after them for miles, crying, "Uuh! uuh!" until they threw him a few cents. The host took the cents from him and kept him to sleep under the shed, on the horses' bedding, and when the horses gave him a kick Cirino ran to wake up the master crying, "Uuh!" and then in the morning he currycombed them and groomed them.

Later he had been attracted by the railway that they were building in the neighborhood. The coach drivers and wayfarers had become rarer on the road, and the idiot didn't know what to think, watching the swallows in the air for hours, and blinking his eyelids at the sun to make it out. Then the first time he saw all those people stuffed into the big cars that were

leaving the station, he seemed to understand. And after that every day he waited for the train, never a minute wrong in his time, as if he had a clock in his head; and while it fled before him, hurling its noise and smoke in his face, he began to run after it, throwing his arms in the air and howling in a tone of anger and menace, "Uuh! uuh!"

The host too, whenever he saw the train passing in the distance puffing through the malaria, said nothing, but spat after it all he felt, shaking his head before the deserted sheds and the empty jugs. Formerly affairs had gone so well with him that he had had four wives, so that they called him "Killwife," and they said he'd got case-hardened to it, and that he was for taking the fifth, if the daughter of Farmer Turi Oricchiazza hadn't given him answer: "God preserve us! not if he was made of gold, that Christian there! He eats up his fellow man like a crocodile!"

But it wasn't true that he'd got case-hardened to it, because when Goodwife Santa had died, his third, he had never taken a mouthful of food till midday, nor a drop of water, and he really cried behind the counter of the inn. "This time I want to take one who is used to the malaria," he had said after that event. "I don't want to suffer like this anymore."

The malaria killed off his wives, one after the other, but they left him just the same, old and wrinkled, so that it was really hard to imagine that such a man had his own brave homicide on his conscience, intending for all that to take a fourth wife. However, each new time he wanted his wife young and appetizing, for the inn could never prosper without a wife, and for this reason customers had become scarce. Now there was nobody left but Neighbor Mommù, the signalman from the railway just near, a man who never spoke a word, and came to drink his glass between train and train, sitting himself down on the bench by the door with his shoes in his hand, to rest his legs.

"The malaria doesn't get those lot!" thought Killwife, also never opening his mouth, because if the malaria had made them fall like flies there'd have been nobody to keep that railway going. The poor wretch, since the only man who had poisoned his existence had been removed from his sight, had now only two enemies in the world: the railway that took away his customers, and the malaria that carried off his wives. All the other people on the plain, as far as the eye could reach, had their moments of blessedness, even if they had someone in bed sinking bit by bit, or if the fever was beating them down on the doorstep, with their handkerchiefs on their heads and their cloaks over their shoulders. They took pleasure looking around on the young wheat that was rising prosperous and green as velvet, or the wheat ears waxing like a sea, and they listened to the long singing of the reapers, stretched out in a line like soldiers, and in every little road the bagpipes were heard, behind which swarms of peasants were just arriving from Calabria for the harvest, dusty people bent under their heavy saddle sacks, the men in front and the women trailing behind, limping and looking with burned, tired faces at the road that stretched before them. And on the brink of every ditch, behind every clump of aloes, at the hour when evening drops down like a gray veil, the pipes of the watchmen fluted among the ripe ears of grain, which fell silent, motionless, as the wind sank, invaded by the same silence of night.

"There you are!" thought Killwife. "If all that lot of folks can only manage not to leave their bones behind them, and get back home, they'll get back with money in their pockets, they will."

As for him, no! He waited neither for harvest nor anything, and he hadn't the spirit to sing. The evening fell sadly enough, through the empty stables and the dark inn. At that hour the train passed whistling in the distance, and Neighbor Mommu

stood beside his signal box with his flag in his hand; but away up there, when the train had vanished in the shadows, they heard Cirino the simpleton running after it shouting, "Uuh!" And Killwife, in the doorway of the dark, deserted inn, thought to himself that there was no malaria for that lot.

At last, when he could no longer pay the rent for the inn and the stabling, the landlord turned him out after he'd lived there fifty-seven years, and Killwife was reduced to looking for a job on the railway himself, and holding the little flag in his hand when the train passed.

And then, tired with running all day up and down the track, worn out with years and misfortunes, he saw twice a day the long line of carriages crowded with people pass by; the jolly companies of shooters spreading over the plain; sometimes a peasant lad playing the accordion with his head bent, bunched up on the seat of a third-class compartment; the beautiful ladies who looked out of the windows with their heads swathed in a veil; the silver and the tarnished steel of the bags and valises that shone under the polished lamps; the high stuffed seat backs with their crochet-work covers. Ah, how lovely it must be traveling in there, snatching a wink of sleep! It was as if a piece of a city were sliding past, with the lit-up streets and the glittering shops. Then the train lost itself in the vast mist of the evening, and the poor fellow, taking off his shoes for a moment, and sitting on the bench, muttered, "Ah! for that lot there isn't any malaria."