

PROPERTY

THE TRAVELER PASSING ALONG by the Lake of Lentini, stretched out there like a piece of dead sea, and by the burned up stubble-fields of the Plain of Catania, and the evergreen orange trees of Francoforte, and the gray cork-trees of Reseconne, and the deserted pasturelands of Passanetto and of Passinatello, if ever he asked, to while away the tedium of the long dusty road, under the sky heavy with heat in the hour when the litter bells ring sadly in the immense campagna, and the mules let their heads and tails hang helpless, and the litter driver sings his melancholy song so as not to be overcome by the malaria sleep, "Whom does the place belong to?" was bound to get for answer, "To Mazzaro." And passing near to a farmstead as big as a village, with store barns that looked like churches, and crowds of hens crouching in the

shade of the big well, and the women putting their hands over their eyes to see who was going by: — “And this place?” — “To Mazzaro.” — And you went on and on, with the malaria weighing on your eyes, and you were startled by the unexpected barking of a dog, as you passed an endless, endless vineyard, which stretched over hill and plain, motionless, as if the dust upon it were weighing it down, and the watchman, stretched out face downward with his gun beneath him, beside the valley, raised his head sleepily to see who it might be. “To Mazzaro.” — Then came an olive grove thick as a wood, under which the grass never grew, and the olive gathering went on until March. They were the olive trees belonging to Mazzaro. And toward evening, as the sun sank red as fire, and the countryside was veiled with sadness, you met the long files of Mazzaro’s plows coming home softly, wearily from the fallow land, and the oxen slowly crossing the ford, with their muzzles in the dark water; and you saw on the far-off grazing land of Canziria, on the naked slope, the immense whitish blotches of the flocks of Mazzaro; and you heard the shepherd’s pipe resounding through the gullies, and the bell of the ram sometimes ringing and sometimes not, and the solitary singing lost in the valley.

All Mazzaro’s property. It seemed as if even the setting sun and the whirring cicalas belonged to Mazzaro, and the birds that went on a short, leaping flight to nestle behind the clods, and the crying of the horned owl in the wood. It was as if Mazzaro had become as big as the world, and you walked upon his belly. Whereas he was an insignificant little fellow, said the litter driver, and you wouldn’t have thought he was worth a farthing, to look at him, with no fat on him except his paunch, and it was a marvel however he filled that in, for he never ate anything more than a penny’s worth of bread, for all that he was rich as a pig, but he had a head on his shoul-

ders that was keen as a diamond, that man had.

In fact, with that head as keen as a diamond he had got together all the property, whereas previously he had to work from morning till night hoeing, pruning, mowing, in the sun and rain and wind, with no shoes to his feet, and not a rag of a cloak to his back; so that everybody remembered the days when they used to give him kicks in the backside, and now they called him *Excellency*, and spoke to him cap in hand. But for all that he hadn't got stuck-up, now that all the Excellencies of the neighborhood were in debt to him, so that he said *Excellency* meant poor devil and bad payer; he still wore the peasant stocking-cap, only his was made of black silk, which was his only grandeur, and lately he had started wearing a felt hat, because it cost less than the long silk stocking-cap. He had possessions as far as his eye could read, and he was a long-sighted man — everywhere, right and left, before and behind, in mountain and plain. More than five thousand mouths, without counting the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, fed upon his lands, without counting his own mouth, that ate less than any of them, and was satisfied with a penny's worth of bread and a bit of cheese, gulped down as fast as he could, standing in a corner of the store barn big as a church, or in the midst of the corn dust, so that you could hardly see him, while his peasants were emptying the sacks, or on top of a straw stack, when the wind swept the frozen country, in the time of the sowing of the seed, or with his head inside a basket, in the hot days of harvesttime. He didn't drink wine, and he didn't smoke, he didn't take snuff, although indeed he grew plenty of tobacco in his fields beside the river, broad-leaved and tall as a boy, the sort that is sold at ninety shillings. He hadn't the vice of gaming, nor of women. As for women he'd never had to bother with any one of them save his mother, who had cost him actually a dollar when he'd had her carried to the cemetery.

And he had thought about it and thought about it times enough, all that property means, when he went with no shoes to his feet, to work on the land that was now his own, and he had proved to himself what it was to earn his shilling a day in the month of July, to work on with your back bent for fourteen hours, with the foreman on horseback behind you, laying about you with a stick if you stood up to straighten yourself for a minute. Therefore he had not let a minute of his whole life pass by that wasn't devoted to the acquiring of property; and now his plows were as many as the long strings of crows that arrive in November; and other strings of mules, endless, carried the seed; the women who were kept squatting in the mire, from October to March, picking up his olives, you couldn't count them, as you can't count the magpies that come to steal the olives; and in vintage time whole villages came to his vineyards, so that as far as ever you could hear folks singing, in the countryside, it was at Mazzaro's vintage. And then at harvest-time Mazzaro's reapers were like an army of soldiers, so that to feed all those folks, with biscuit in the morning and bread and bitter oranges at nine o'clock and at midday, and home-made pasta in the evening, it took shoals of money, and they dished up the fettuccine in kneading troughs as big as wash-tubs. For that reason, when nowadays he went on horseback along the long line of his reapers, his cudgel in his hand, he didn't miss a single one of them with his eye, and kept shouting: "Bend over it, boys!" He had to have his hand in his pocket all the year round, spending, and simply for the land tax the king took so much from him that Mazzaro went into a fever every time.

However, every year all those store barns as big as churches were filled up with grain so that you had to raise up the roof to get it all in; and every time Mazzaro sold his wine it took over a day to count the money, all good silver pieces, for he didn't

want any of your dirty paper in payment for his goods, and he went to buy dirty paper only when he had to pay the king, or other people; and at the cattle fairs the herds belonging to Mazzaro covered all the fairground, and choked up the roads, till it took half a day to let them go past, and the saint in procession with the band had at times to turn down another street, to make way for them.

And all that property he had got together himself, with his own hands and his own head, with not sleeping at night, with catching ague and malaria, with slaving from dawn till dark, and going around under sun and rain, and wearing out his boots and his mules — wearing out everything except himself, thinking of his property, which was all he had in the world, for he had neither children nor grandchildren, nor relations of any sort; he'd got nothing but his property. And when a man is made like that, it just means he is made for property.

And property was made for him. It really seemed as if he had a magnet for it, because property likes to stay with those who know how to keep it, and don't squander it like that baron who had previously been Mazzaro's master, and had taken him out of charity, naked and ignorant, to work on his fields; and the baron had been owner of all those meadows, and all those woods, and all those vineyards, and all those herds, so that when he came down to visit his estates on horseback, with his keepers behind him, he seemed like a king, and they got ready his lodging and his dinner for him, the simpleton, so that everybody knew the hour and the minute when he was due to arrive, and naturally they didn't let themselves be caught with their hands in the sack.

"That man absolutely asks to be robbed!" said Mazzaro, and he almost burst himself laughing when the baron kicked his behind, and he rubbed his rear with his hand, muttering: "Fools should stop at home. Property doesn't belong to those

that have got it, but to those that know how to acquire it." He, on the contrary, since he had acquired his property, certainly didn't send to say whether he was coming to superintend the harvest, or the vintage, and when and in what way, but he turned up unexpectedly on foot or on mule-back, without keepers, with a piece of bread in his pocket, and he slept beside his own sheaves, with his eyes open and the gun between his legs.

And in that way Mazzaro little by little became master of all the baron's possessions; and the latter was turned out, first from the olive groves, then from the vineyards, then from the grazing land, and then from the farmsteads and finally from his very mansion, so that not a day passed but he was signing stamped paper, and Mazzaro put his own brave cross underneath. Nothing was left to the baron but the stone shield that used to stand over his entrance door — which was the only thing he hadn't wanted to sell, saying to Mazzaro: "There's only this, out of everything I've got, which is no use for you." And that was true; Mazzaro had no use for it, and wouldn't have given two cents for it. The baron still said *thou* to him, but he didn't kick his behind any longer.

"Ah what a fine thing, to have Mazzaro's fortune!" folks said, but they didn't know what it had taken to make that fortune, how much thinking, how much danger of being sent to the galleys, and how that head that was sharp as a diamond had worked day and night, better than a mill wheel, to get all that property together. If the proprietor of a piece of farmland adjoining his persisted in not giving it up to him, and wanted to take Mazzaro by the throat, he had to find some stratagem to force him to sell, to make him fall, in spite of the peasant's shrewdness. He went to him, for example, boasting about the fertility of a holding that wouldn't even produce lupines, and kept on till he made him believe it was the promised land, till

the poor devil let himself be persuaded into leasing it, to speculate with it, and then he lost the lease, his house, and his own bit of land, which Mazzaro got hold of — for a bit of bread. And how many annoyances Mazzaro had to put up with! His half-profits peasants coming to complain of the bad seasons, his debtors always sending their wives in a procession to tear their hair and beat their breasts trying to persuade him not to turn them out and put them in the street, by seizing their mule or their donkey, so that they'd not have anything to eat.

“You see what I eat,” he replied. “Bread and onion! and I've got all those store barns cram full, and I'm owner of all that stuff.” And if they asked him for a handful of beans from all that stuff, he said:

“What, do you think I stole them? Don't you know what it costs, to sow them, and hoe them, and harvest them?” And if they asked him for a cent he said he hadn't got one, which was true, he hadn't got one. He never had half-a-dollar in his pocket; it took all his money to make that property yield and increase, and money came and went like a river through the house. Besides, money didn't matter to him; he said it wasn't property, and as soon as he'd got together a certain sum he immediately bought a piece of land; because he wanted to get so that he had as much land as the king, and be better than the king, because the king can neither sell his land nor say it is his own.

Only one thing grieved him, and that was that he was beginning to get old, and he had to leave the earth there behind him. This was an injustice on God's part, that after having slaved one's life away getting property together, when you've got it, and you'd like some more, you have to leave it behind you. And he remained for hours sitting on a small basket, with his chin in his hands, looking at his vineyards growing green beneath his eyes, and his fields of ripe wheat waving like a sea,

and the olive groves veiling the mountains like a mist, and if a half-naked boy passed in front of him, bent under his load like a tired ass, he threw his stick at his legs, out of envy, and muttered: “Look at him with his length of days in front of him; him who’s got nothing to bless himself with!”

So that when they told him it was time for him to be turning away from his property, and thinking of his soul, he rushed out into the courtyard like a madman, staggering, and went around killing his own ducks and turkeys, hitting them with his stick and screaming: “You’re my own property, you come along with me!”