

Rustic Honour

When Turiddu Macca, old Nunzia's son, came home from soldiering, he strutted about the village square every Sunday in his *bersagliere* uniform, with the red cap which looked like a fortune-teller's when she sets up her stall with her cage of canaries. The girls, going to Mass with their noses well hidden in their mantillas, could not take their eyes off him, and the lads buzzed round him like flies. And he had brought back with him a pipe with its bowl carved in a lifelike representation of the king on horseback, and he struck matches on the seat of his trousers, raising his leg as he did so, as though about to give someone a kick. But, despite all this, Lola, the daughter of Farmer Angelo, had not shown herself either at Mass or on her balcony, because she had got engaged to someone from Licodia, a carter who had four Sortino mules in his stable. As soon as Turiddu heard of it, Good God, he'd have his guts out, he'd have the guts out of that fellow from Licodia! But he did not do anything, except let off steam by singing every angry song he knew under that beauty's window.

'Hasn't Nunzia's Turiddu got anything better to do,' asked the neighbours, 'than spend the night in song like a lonely thrush?'

At long last he did come across Lola as she was returning from a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Peril. But when she saw him she did not change colour. It was as though none of this was anything to do with her.

'It's a lucky man who catches sight of you,' he said to her.

'Oh, Turiddu! They told me you'd come back on the first of the month.'

'I was told some other things too,' he replied. 'Is it true that

you're marrying Alfio the carter?'

'I am, God willing,' Lola replied, pulling the two corners of her kerchief up to her chin.

'You're doing God's will by chopping and changing as it suits you! And was it the will of God that I should come back home from as far away as I did, just to hear this pleasant news, Lola?'

The wretched man tried to put a brave face on it, but his voice had gone hoarse. And as he walked behind the girl he swayed about, with the tassel of his cap swinging here and there on his shoulders. To be honest, she was sorry to see him with such a long face, but she had not the heart to beguile him with pleasant words.

'Look, Turiddu,' she told him finally, 'you must let me catch up with my friends. What would people say if they saw me with you?'

'You're right,' Turiddu replied. 'Now that you're going to marry Alfio, who has four mules in his stable, we mustn't make people talk. My poor mother, on the other hand, had to sell our bay mule and that bit of a vineyard by the main road, when I was a soldier. The good old days have gone, and you don't remember the times when we used to speak to each other from the window and from the farmyard, and how, before I went away, you gave me that handkerchief! God knows what tears I wept in it as I went away, so far away that even the name of our village was not known where I went. Well, goodbye now, Lola. These things come and go, and now it's all over between us.'

Lola married the carter, and on Sundays she would sit on the balcony, with her hands on her belly in order to let people see all the huge gold rings which her husband had given her. Turiddu continued to walk up and down the little street, with his pipe in his mouth and his hands in his pockets, with an air

of indifference, eyeing the girls. But it ate away at him inside to think Lola's husband had all that gold, and that she pretended not to notice him when he walked by. 'I'll give that bitch one in the eye,' he muttered.

Opposite Alfio lived Farmer Cola, who was rolling in money, so they said, and had a daughter still at home. Turiddu worked it so that he was taken on by Farmer Cola, and he began to hang about the house and say sweet nothings to the girl.

'Why don't you go and say these nice things to Lola?' asked Santa.

'Lola is a great lady now. Lola has married a big shot now!'

'I'm not good enough for a big shot.'

'You're worth twenty Lolas, and I know someone who wouldn't look at Lola, nor even the saint she's named after, when you're there. Lola's not fit to untie your shoelaces. She's not.'

'When he couldn't reach the grapes the fox -'

'Said: How sweet you are, my little pip!'

'Hey! Watch your hands, Turiddu!'

'Are you afraid I'll eat you?'

'I'm not afraid of you or your God.'

'Oh yes! We know. Your mother was from Licodia! You're a quarrelsome lot! Oh! I could eat you up with my eyes!'

'Just eat me with your eyes then, and we won't make any crumbs. But in the meantime lift up that bundle for me.'

'For you I'd lift up the whole house, I would!'

To hide her blushes, she took up a log which was to hand and threw it at him, and it was a wonder that she missed him.

'Let's get a move on. We won't tie any twigs into bundles by chattering.'

'If I was rich, I'd look out for a wife like you, Santa.'

'I won't marry a big shot like Lola, but I have a good dowry too, for when the Lord sends me someone.'

‘We know that you’re rich. We know it.’

‘Alright, you know it. Now hurry up. My Dad will be here soon, and I don’t want to be found in the yard.’

When he came, her father began by making a face, but the girl pretended not to notice, because the tassel of Turiddu’s cap had tickled her fancy, and was still swinging in front of her eyes. When her father put Turiddu out of doors, his daughter opened the window to him, and she remained chattering with him for the whole evening, until everyone about was talking of nothing else.

‘I am going mad for you,’ said Turiddu, ‘and I can’t sleep or eat.’

‘Rubbish.’

‘I wish I was the son of Victor Emmanuel, so that I could marry you!’

‘Rubbish.’

‘Oh God, I could eat you like a piece of bread!’

‘Rubbish.’

‘On my honour!’

‘Ah! Dear me!’

Every evening Lola listened, hidden behind a pot of basil, and she went hot and cold. One day she called out to Turiddu:

‘So this is how it is, Turiddu? Old friends don’t say hello to each other any more?’

‘What!’ sighed Turiddu. ‘He’s a lucky one who can say hello to you!’

‘If you want to say hello to me, you know where I live,’ replied Lola.

Turiddu went to say hello to her so often that Santa noticed it, and she shut the window in his face. The neighbours pointed him out with a smile and a nod of the head when the *bersagliere* went by. Lola’s husband was away, going round

the markets with his mules.

'I'm going to confession on Sunday. I dreamt of black grapes last night,' said Lola.

'Let it go! Let it go!' pleaded Turiddu.

'No, now that Easter's coming, my husband will want to know why I've not been to confession.'

'Ah!' murmured Santa, the daughter of Farmer Cola, waiting on her knees in front of the confessional for her turn, while Lola was laundering her sins. 'Upon my soul, it's not Rome I want to send you to for your penance!'

Alfio came home with his mules, loaded with cash, and he brought his wife a present of a new dress for the feast.

'You're right to bring her presents,' his neighbour Santa said to him, 'since while you've been away your wife has been decorating the house for you!'

Alfio was one of those carters who wear their caps at a rakish slant, and so when he heard his wife spoken of in that way he changed colour as if he had been stabbed. 'By God!' he exclaimed, 'If you've not been right in what you saw, I won't leave you your eyes to weep with, neither you nor the rest of your family!'

'I'm not in the habit of weeping!' answered Santa. 'I didn't weep even when I saw Nunzia's Turiddu with my own eyes going into your wife's house at night.'

'Alright,' Alfio answered. 'Thanks a lot!'

Turiddu, now that the cat was no longer away, did not hang about the little street any more in the daytime, but whiled away his boredom at the inn, with his friends. On Easter Saturday they had a plate of sausages on the table. When Alfio came in, Turiddu knew, just by the way he fixed his eyes on him, what he had come for, and he put his fork down on his plate.

'You want me to do something for you, Alfio?' he asked.

‘No, Turiddu. But it’s a while since I saw you, and I wanted to speak to you about something which you know about.’

Turiddu had at first offered him his glass, but Alfio pushed it aside with his hand. So Turiddu rose, and said to him:

‘Here I am, Alfio.’

The carter threw his arms round his neck.

‘If you come to the prickly pears at Canziria tomorrow morning, we’ll be able to discuss our business then.’

‘Wait for me on the main road at sunrise, and we can go together.’

Then they exchanged the kiss of defiance. Turiddu clenched the carter’s ear between his teeth, which was a solemn promise that he would not fail.

His friends had left the sausages, without saying anything, and they accompanied Turiddu home. Poor old Nunzia used to wait up late for him every evening.

‘Mother,’ Turiddu said to her, ‘you remember when I went for a soldier, and you thought I would never come back? Give me a big kiss as you did then, because tomorrow morning I am going a long way away.’

Before dawn he took his flick-knife, which he had hidden under the hay when he was conscripted, and set off for the prickly pears at Canziria.

‘Oh, Jesus and Mary! Where are you going in such a rush?’ whined Lola in dismay, as her husband was about to go out.

‘I’m not going far,’ said Alfio, ‘but for you it would be better if I never came back.’

In her nightdress, Lola prayed at the foot of the bed and pressed to her lips the rosary which Brother Bernardino had brought back for her from the Holy Land, and said as many Hail Marys as there were beads on it.

After he had walked some time with his companion, who

remained silent and had his cap pulled down over his eyes, Turiddu spoke: 'As God's my witness I know that I'm in the wrong, and I would let myself be killed. But before I came out I saw my old mother who had got up to see me go, pretending that she needed to see to the hens, as if her heart was telling her something. And as God's my witness I'll slaughter you like a dog so that the poor old woman won't have to cry.'

'That's the way it is,' replied Alfio, taking off his waistcoat, 'and we'll both strike hard.'

They were both good men with the knife. Turiddu caught the first blow, and he was quick enough to catch it on his arm. When he returned it, he returned it well and truly, and struck at Alfio's groin.

'Ah, Turiddu! You really do want to kill me!'

'Yes, I told you. Since I saw my old mother in the hen-house I can't get her out of my eyes.'

'Open them wide then, your eyes!' Alfio yelled at him. 'I'm here to give you what you deserve.'

As he crouched on guard, bent double so that he could keep his left hand on his wound, which was hurting him, and practically scraping the ground with his elbow, he snatched up a handful of dust and threw it into his adversary's eyes.

'Ah!' howled Turiddu, blinded. 'It's over!'

He tried to save himself by jumping back in his desperation, but Alfio caught him another blow in the stomach and a third in the throat.

'That's three for you. That's for decorating my house. Now your mother will leave the hens alone.'

Turiddu staggered about for some time among the prickly pears, and then he fell in a heap. The blood gurgled and frothed in his throat, and he could not even utter the words: 'Oh, my mother!'