

## She-Wolf

She was tall and thin. She had only the firm, strong breasts which dark-haired women have, and she was not even young any more. She was pale, as though she was always suffering from malaria, and in all that pallor she had two large eyes, and fresh red lips that seemed to devour you.

In the village they called her She-Wolf, because she was never satisfied – with anything. Women made the sign of the cross when they saw her go by, alone like a wild bitch, with that rambling, mistrustful movement of a hungry wolf. She bled their sons and husbands white in no time with those red lips of hers, and had them trailing behind her skirt merely by looking at them with those satanic eyes, even if they had just been at the altar of St Agrippina. Fortunately, She-Wolf never went to church – not at Easter, not at Christmas, not to hear Mass, not to make her confession. Father Angiolino of St Mary of Jesus, a true servant of God, had lost his soul because of her.

Maricchia, poor thing, a good, honest girl, wept in secret, because she was She-Wolf's daughter, and no one would ever take her as a wife, although she had some fine things in her bottom drawer, and her own good piece of land, like every other girl in the village.

One day She-Wolf fell in love with a good-looking boy who had just returned from military service and was mowing hay with her in the notary's close. That is, she really fell in love, feeling her flesh burn under the fustian of her bodice, and suffering, as she looked into his eyes, the sort of thirst which people have in the heat of the day in June, out in the open plains. But he went on mowing tranquilly, with his nose in his bundles of hay, and said to her, 'What is wrong, Pina?' In the

vast fields, where only the crickets crackled in their flight, when the sun beat down directly overhead, She-Wolf tied up bundle after bundle, and sheaf after sheaf, without ever tiring, without straightening her back for an instant, without putting her lips to her flask, but always at Nanni's heels. He went on mowing and mowing, and now and then he asked her, 'What do you want, Pina?'

One evening, when the men were dozing in the farmyard, tired after the long day's work, and the dogs were whining over the vast, black countryside, she did say to him what she wanted, 'I want *you!* You who are as handsome as the sun, and as sweet as honey. I want you!'

'But I want your daughter, who's young and unmarried,' Nanni replied, laughing.

She-Wolf ran her fingers through her hair and scratched her head, without saying a word, and then went away, and did not reappear in the farmyard. But in October she saw Nanni again, at the time when they were pressing the olives for their oil, because he was working near her house, and the creaking of the press kept her awake all night.

'Take the sack of olives,' she said to her daughter, 'and come with me.'

Nanni was pushing the olives under the millstone with his shovel, and shouting out to the mule to keep going. 'You want to marry my daughter Maricchia?' asked Pina. 'She has her father's goods, and I'll give her my home as well. It'll be enough for me if you leave me a corner in the kitchen where I can lay my palliasse.' 'If that's how it is, we can talk about it at Christmas,' said Nanni. Nanni was all greasy and dirty with the oil and the olives which were put ready to ferment, and Maricchia did not want him at any price. But her mother seized her by the hair, in front of the fireplace, and said to her

between her teeth, 'If you don't take him, I'll kill you!'

Then She-Wolf became almost ill, and people went about saying that when the devil gets old he becomes a hermit. She no longer went here and there. She no longer sat in her doorway, with those eyes of one possessed. Her son-in-law, when she looked him in the face with those eyes, started to laugh, and he would take out his scapular of the Madonna and make the sign of the cross with it. Maricchia stayed at home to nurse the children, and her mother went into the fields and worked with the men, weeding, hoeing, looking after the animals, pruning the vines, in the north-east and east winds of January, or in the sirocco in August when the mules let their heads hang drooping down and the men slept face-down in the shelter of the wall on the north side. That hour between the evening and the night, when no good woman ever comes in sight Pina was the only living soul to be seen wandering through the countryside, on the burning stones of the lanes, in the dry stubble of the vast fields which stretched away far into the sultry distance, towards the misty crest of Etna, where the sky was oppressive on the horizon.

'Wake up!' said She-Wolf to Nanni who was sleeping in the ditch by the dusty hedge with his arms round his head. 'Wake up! I've brought you some wine to cool your throat.'

Nanni opened his eyes wide. Half asleep and half awake, he was bewildered to find her standing over him, pale, with her arrogant bosom, and her eyes as black as coal, and he fumbled forwards.

'No! No good woman ever comes in sight between the evening and the night!' sobbed Nanni, hiding his face once more deep down in the dry grass in the ditch, with his hands in his hair. 'Go away! Go away! Don't come to the farmyard any more!'

She did go away, She-Wolf, tying up her superb tresses once more, staring fixedly in front of her at her own footsteps in the hot stubble, with her eyes as black as coal.

But she came back to the farmyard on other occasions, and Nanni said nothing to her. And when she was late in coming, in the hour between evening and night, he went to wait for her at the head of the white, deserted lane, with the sweat running down his forehead. And afterwards he always ran his fingers through his hair, and repeated every time, 'Go away! Go away! Don't come back to the farmyard any more!' Maricchia wept night and day, and she looked her mother in the face with eyes burning with tears and jealousy, like a young she-wolf herself, every time she saw her coming in from the fields, pale and silent. 'Wicked woman!' she said to her. 'A wicked mother!'

'Be quiet!'

'Thief! Thief!'

'Be quiet!'

'I'll go to the sergeant-major of the *carabinieri*, I will!'

'Alright, go!'

And she did go, with her children in her arms, without any fear and without weeping, like a mad woman, because by now she too loved that husband whom she had been forced to accept, greasy and dirty from the olives which had been put ready to ferment.

The sergeant-major sent for Nanni and threatened him with prison and the gallows. Nanni started to sob and tear his hair. He denied nothing, and he did not try to exculpate himself. 'It's a temptation!' he said. 'And it's the temptation of hell!' He threw himself at the sergeant-major's feet, begging him to send him to prison.

'For the love of God, sergeant-major, get me out of this hell!'

Have me killed, send me to prison, but don't let me see her ever ever again!'

But She-Wolf said to the sergeant-major, 'No! I kept for myself a little corner in the kitchen to sleep in, when I gave him my house in dowry. The house is mine. I'm not going away.'

Shortly afterwards Nanni had a kick in the chest from a mule, and he was in danger of death. But the parish priest refused to bring him the Sacred Host unless She-Wolf left the house. She-Wolf left, and then her son-in-law too was able to prepare himself for his departure, like a good Christian. He made his confession and received Holy Communion with such signs of repentance and contrition that all the neighbours and busybodies wept by the bed of the dying man. And it would have been better for him if he had died at that time, before the devil came back to tempt him and to pierce his body and soul when he was cured. 'Leave me alone!' he said to She-Wolf. 'For the love of God, leave me alone! I've looked death in the face! Poor Maricchia is simply in despair. Now everyone knows about it! It's better for you and for me if I don't see you again...'

He felt like tearing his eyes out so as not to see She-Wolf's eyes, when they looked into his and made him lose both body and soul. He no longer knew what to do to free himself from her enchantment. He paid for Masses for the souls in Purgatory, and he went to ask the parish priest and the sergeant-major for help. At Easter he went to confession, and he shuffled along, licking the cobbles in front of the church for a distance of six spans as a penance, and then, when She-Wolf came back to tempt him, 'Listen to me!' he said to her. 'Don't come to the farmyard any more. Because if you do, I swear to God I'll kill you!'

‘Kill me,’ said She-Wolf. ‘It doesn’t matter to me. But I don’t want to live without you.’

When he saw her in the distance, in the middle of the green crops, he stopped hoeing the vines, and went to pull the axe out of the elm tree. She-Wolf saw him coming, pale and wild-eyed, with his axe glittering in the sunlight, and she did not step back one pace, she did not lower her eyes, but continued to walk towards him, with her arms full of bundles of red poppies, and devouring him with her black eyes. ‘Ah! Curse your soul!’ stammered Nanni.