

STORY OF THE SAINT JOSEPH'S ASS

THEY HAD BOUGHT HIM at the fair at Buccheri when he was quite a foal, when as soon as he saw a she-ass he went up to her to find her teats; for which he got a good many bangs on the head and showers of blows upon the buttocks, and caused a great shouting of "Gee back!" Neighbor Neli, seeing him lively and stubborn as he was, a young creature that licked his nose after it had been hit, giving his ears a shake, said, "This is the chap for me!" And he went straight to the owner, holding in his pocket his hand that clasped the eight dollars.

"It's a fine foal," said the owner, "and it's worth more than eight dollars. Never mind if he's got that black and white skin, like a magpie. I'll just show you his mother, whom we keep there in the bough shelter because the foal has always got his nose at the teats. You'll see a fine black beast there; she works

for me better than a mule, and has brought me more young ones than she has hairs on her back. Upon my soul, I don't know where that magpie jacket has come from, on the foal. But he's sound in the bone, I tell you! And you don't value men according to their faces. Look what a chest, and legs like pillars! Look how he holds his ears! An ass that keeps his ears straight up like that, you can put him in a cart or in the plow as you like, and make him carry ten quarters of buckwheat better than a mule, as true as this holy day today! Feel this tail, if you and all your family couldn't hang on to it!"

Neighbor Neli knew it better than he; but he wasn't such a fool as to agree, and stood on his own, with his hand in his pocket, shrugging his shoulders and curling his nose, while the owner led the colt around in front of him.

"Hm!" muttered Neighbor Neli, "with that hide on him, he's like Saint Joseph's ass. Those colored animals are all Jonahs, and when you ride through the village on their backs everybody laughs at you. What do you want me to make you a present of, for Saint Joseph's ass?"

Then the owner turned his back on him in a rage, shouting that if he didn't know anything about animals, or if he hadn't got the money to pay with, he'd better not come to the fair and make Christians waste their time, on the blessed day that it was.

Neighbor Neli let him swear, and went off with his brother, who was pulling him by his jacket sleeve, and saying that if he was going to throw away his money on that ugly beast, he deserved to be kicked.

However, on the sly they kept their eye on the Saint Joseph's ass, and on its owner who was pretending to shell some broad beans, with the halter rope between his legs, while Neighbor Neli went wandering around among the groups of mules and horses, and stopping to look, and bargaining for first one and then the other of the best beasts, without ever opening the fist

that he kept in his pocket with the eight dollars, as if he'd got the money to buy half the fair. But his brother said in his ear, motioning toward the ass of Saint Joseph: "That's the chap for us!"

The wife of the owner of the ass from time to time ran to look what had happened, and finding her husband with the halter rope in his hand, she said to him: "Isn't the Madonna going to send us anybody today to buy the foal?"

And her husband answered every time: "Not so far! There came one man to try for him, and he liked him. But he drew back when he had to pay for him, and has gone off with his money. See him, that one there, in the white stocking-cap, behind the flock of sheep. But he's not bought anything up to now, which means he'll come back."

The woman would have liked to sit down on a couple of stones, just close to her ass, to see if he would be sold. But her husband said to her:

"You clear out! If they see we're waiting, they'll never come to bargain."

Meanwhile the foal kept nuzzling with his nose between the legs of the she-asses that passed by, chiefly because he was hungry, and his master, the moment the young thing opened his mouth to bray, fetched him a bang and made him be quiet, because the buyers wouldn't want him if they heard him.

"It's still there," said Neighbor Neli in his brother's ear, pretending to come past again to look for the man who was selling broiled chickpeas. "If we wait till avemaria we can get him for a dollar less than the price we offered."

The sun of May was hot, so that from time to time, in the midst of the shouting and swarming of the fair there fell a great silence over all the fairground, as if there was nobody there, and then the mistress of the ass came back to say to her husband:

"Don't you hold out for a dollar more or less, because there's no money to buy anything in with, this evening; and

then you know the foal will eat a dollar's worth in a month, if he's left on our hands."

"If you're not going," replied her husband, "I'll fetch you a kick you won't forget!"

So the hours of the fair rolled by, but none of those who passed before the ass of Saint Joseph stopped to look at him; for sure enough his master had chosen the most humble position, next to the low-price cattle, so as not to make him show up too badly beside the beautiful bay mules and the glossy horses! It took a fellow like Neighbor Neli to go and bargain for Saint Joseph's ass, which set everybody in the fair laughing the moment they saw it. With having waited so long in the sun the foal let his head and his ears drop, and his owner had seated himself gloomily on the stones, with his hands also dangling between his knees, and the halter rope in his hands, watching here and there the long shadows, which began to form in the plain as the sun went down, from the legs of all such beasts that had not found a buyer. Then Neighbor Neli and his brother, and another friend whom they had picked up for the occasion, came walking that way, looking into the air, so that the owner of the ass also twisted his head away to show he wasn't sitting there waiting for them; and the friend of Neighbor Neli said like this, looking vacant, as if the idea had just come to him:

"Oh, look at the ass of Saint Joseph! Why don't you buy him, Neighbor Neli?"

"I asked the price of him this morning; he's too dear. Then I should have everybody laughing at me with that black-and-white donkey. You can see that nobody would have him, so far."

"That's a fact, but the color doesn't matter, if a thing is any use to you."

And he asked of the owner:

"How much do you expect us to make you a present of, for

that Saint Joseph's donkey?"

The wife of the owner of the ass of Saint Joseph, seeing that the bargaining had started again, came edging softly up to them, with her hands clasped under her short cloak.

"Don't mention such a thing!" Neighbor Neli began to shout, running away across the plain. "Don't mention such a thing to me; I won't hear a word of it."

"If he doesn't want it, let him go without it," answered the owner. "If he doesn't take it, somebody else will. It's a sad man who has nothing left to sell, after the fair!"

"But I mean him to listen to me, by the blessed devil I do!" squealed the friend. "Can't I say my own fool's say like anybody else?"

And he ran to seize Neighbor Neli by the jacket; then he came back to speak a word in the ear of the ass's owner, who now wanted at any cost to go home with his little donkey, so the friend threw his arms around his neck, whispering: "Listen! a dollar more or less — if you don't sell it today, you won't find another softy like my pal here to buy your beast, which isn't worth a cigar."

And he embraced the ass's mistress also, talking in her ear, to get her on his side. But she shrugged her shoulders and replied with a sullen face:

"It's my man's business. It's nothing to do with me. But if he lets you have it for less than nine dollars he's a simpleton, in all conscience! It cost us more!"

"I was a lunatic to offer eight dollars this morning," put in Neighbor Neli. "You see now whether you've found anybody else to buy it at that price. There's nothing left in all the fair but three or four scabby sheep and the ass of Saint Joseph. Seven dollars now, if you like."

"Take it," suggested the ass's mistress to her husband, with tears in her eyes. "We haven't a cent to buy anything in

tonight, and Turiddu has got the fever on him again; he needs some sulfate."

"All the devils!" bawled her husband. "If you don't get out, I'll give you a taste of the halter!" "Seven and a half, there!" cried the friend at last, shaking him hard by the jacket collar. "Neither you nor me! This time you've got to take my word, by all the saints in paradise! And I don't ask as much as a glass of wine. You can see the sun's gone down. Then what are you waiting for, the pair of you?"

And he snatched the halter rope from the owner's hand, while Neighbor Neli, swearing, drew out of his pocket the fist with the eight dollars, and gave them him without looking at them, as if he was tearing out his own liver. The friend drew aside with the mistress of the ass, to count the money on a stone, while the owner of the ass rushed through the fair like a young colt, swearing and punching himself on the head.

But then he permitted himself to go back to his wife, who was very slowly and carefully counting over again the money in the handkerchief, and he asked:

"Is it right?"

"Yes, it's quite right; Saint Gaetano be praised! Now I'll go to the druggist."

"I've fooled them! I'd have given it him for five dollars if I'd had to; those colored donkeys are all Jonahs."

And Neighbor Neli, leading the little donkey behind him down the slope, said:

"As true as God's above I've stolen his foal from him! The color doesn't matter. Look what legs, like pillars, neighbor. He's worth nine dollars with your eyes shut."

"If it hadn't been for me," replied the friend, "you wouldn't have done a thing. Here, I've still got half a dollar of yours. So if you like, we'll go and drink your donkey's health with it."

And now the colt stood in need of all his health to earn back the seven and a half dollars he had cost, and the straw he ate. Meanwhile he took upon himself to keep gamboling behind Neighbor Neli, trying to bite his jacket in fun, as if he knew it was the jacket of his new master, and he didn't care a rap about leaving forever the stable where he had lived in the warmth, near his mother, rubbing his muzzle on the edge of the manger, or butting and capering with the ram, or going to rouse up the pig in its corner. And his mistress, who was once more counting the money in the handkerchief in front of the druggist's counter, she didn't either once think of how she had seen the foal born, all black and white with his skin as glossy as silk, and he couldn't stand on his legs yet, but lay nestling in the sun in the yard, and all the grass that he had eaten to get so big and stout had passed through her hands. The only one who remembered her foal was the she-ass, who stretched out her neck braying toward the stable door; but when she no longer had her teats swollen with milk, she too forgot about the foal.

"Now this creature," said Neighbor Neli, "you'll see he'll carry me ten quarters of buckwheat better than a mule. And at harvest I'll set him threshing."

At the threshing the colt, tied in a string with the other beasts, old mules and broken-down horses, trotted around over the sheaves from morning till night, till he was so tired he didn't even want to open his mouth to bite at the heap of straw when they had put him to rest in the shade, now that a little wind had sprung up, so that the peasants could toss up the grain into the air with broad wooden forks, to winnow it, crying, "*Viva Maria!*"

Then he let his muzzle and his ears hang down, like a grown-up ass, his eye spent, as if he was tired of looking out over the vast white campagna that fumed here and there with the dust from the threshing floors, and it seemed as if he was

made for nothing else but to be let die of thirst and made to trot around on the sheaves. At evening he went back to the village with full saddlebags, and the master's lad went behind him pricking him between the legs, along the edges of the byway that seemed alive with the twittering of tits and the scent of catmint and of rosemary, and the donkey would have liked to snatch a mouthful, if they hadn't made him trot all the time, till the blood ran down his legs, and they had to take him to the vet; but his master didn't care, because the harvest had been a good one, and the colt had earned his seven and a half dollars. His master said: "Now he's done his work, and if I sell him for five dollars, I've still made money by him."

The only one who was fond of the foal was the lad who made him trot along the little road, when they were coming home from the threshing floor, and he cried while the farrier was burning the creature's legs with a red-hot iron, so that the colt twisted himself up, with his tail in the air and his ears as erect as when he had roved around the fairground, and he tried to get free from the twisted rope that pressed his lips, and he rolled his eyes with pain almost as if he had human understanding, when the farrier's lad came to change the red-hot irons, and his skin smoked and frizzled like fish in a frying pan. But Neighbor Neli shouted at his son: "Silly fool! What are you crying for? He's done his work now, and seeing that the harvest has gone well we'll sell him and buy a mule, which will be better for us."

Some things children don't understand; and after they had sold the colt to Farmer Cirino from Licodia, Neighbor Neli's son used to go to visit it in the stable, to stroke its nose and neck, and the ass would turn to snuff at him as if its heart were still bound to him, whereas donkeys are made to be tied up where their master wishes, and they change their fate as they change their stable. Farmer Cirino from Licodia had bought

the Saint Joseph's ass cheap, because it still had the wound in the pastern; and the wife of Neighbor Neli, when she saw the ass going by with its new master, said: "There goes our luck; that black-and-white hide brings a jolly threshing floor; and now times go from bad to worse, so that we've even sold the mule again."

Farmer Cirino had yoked the ass to the plow, with the old horse that went like a jewel, drawing out his own brave furrow all day long, for miles and miles, from the time when the larks began to trill in the dawn-white sky, till when the robins ran to huddle behind the bare twigs that quivered in the cold, with their short flight and their melancholy chirping, in the mist that rose like a sea. Only, seeing that the ass was smaller than the horse, they had put him a pad of straw on the saddle, under the yoke, and he went at it harder than ever, breaking the frozen sod, pulling with all his might from the shoulder. "This creature saves my horse for me, because he's getting old," said Farmer Cirino. "He's got a heart as big as the Plain of Catania, has that ass of Saint Joseph! And you'd never think it."

And he said to his wife, who was following behind him clutched in her scanty cloak, parsimoniously scattering the seed:

"If anything should happen to him, think what a loss it would be! We should be ruined, with all the season's work in hand."

And the woman looked at the work in hand, at the little stony desolate field, where the earth was white and cracked, because there had been no rain for so long, the water coming all in mist, the mist that rots the seed; so that when the time came to hoe the young corn it was like the devil's beard, so sparse and yellow, as if you'd burned it with matches. "In spite of the way we worked that land!" whined Farmer Cirino, tearing off his jacket. "That donkey put his guts into it like a mule! He's the ass of misfortune, he is."

His wife had a lump in her throat when she looked at that burned up cornfield, and only answered with the big tears that came to her eyes:

“It isn’t the donkey’s fault. He brought a good year to Neighbor Neli. It’s we who are unlucky.”

So the ass of Saint Joseph changed masters once more, for Farmer Cirino went back again with his sickle from the corn field, there was no need to reap it that year, in spite of the fact that they’d hung images of the saints on to the cane hedge, and had spent twenty cents having it blessed by the priest. “The devil is after us!” Farmer Cirino went swearing through those ears of corn that stood up straight like feathers, which even the ass wouldn’t eat; and he spat into the air at the blue sky that had not a drop of water in it. Then Neighbor Luciano the carter, meeting Farmer Cirino leading home the ass with empty saddlebags, asked him: “What do you want me to give you for Saint Joseph’s ass?”

“Give me what you like. Curse him and whoever made him,” replied Farmer Cirino. “Now we haven’t got bread to eat, nor barley to give to the beast.”

“I’ll give you three dollars because you’re ruined; but the ass isn’t worth it, he won’t last above six months. See what a poor sight he is!”

“You ought to have asked more,” Farmer Cirino’s wife began to grumble after the bargain was concluded. “Neighbor Luciano’s mule has died, and he hasn’t the money to buy another. If he hadn’t bought the Saint Joseph’s ass he wouldn’t know what to do with his cart and harness; and you’ll see that donkey will bring him riches.”

The ass then learned to pull the cart, which was too high on the shafts for him, and weighed so heavily on his shoulders that he wouldn’t have lasted even six months, scrambling his way up the steep rough roads, when it took all Neighbor Lu-

ciano's cudgeling to put a bit of breath into his body; and when he went downhill it was worse, because all the load came down on top of him, and pressed on him so much that he had to hold on with his back curved up in an arch, with those poor legs that had been burned by fire, so that people seeing him began to laugh, and when he fell down it took all the angels of paradise to get him up again. But Neighbor Luciano knew that he pulled his ton and a half of stuff better than a mule, and he got paid forty cents a half-ton. "Every day the Saint Joseph's ass lives it means a dollar and a dime earned," he said, "and he costs me less to feed than a mule." Sometimes people toiling up on foot at a snail's pace behind the cart, seeing that poor beast digging his hoofs in with no strength left, and arching his spine, breathing quick, his eye hopeless, suggested: "Put a stone under the wheel, and let that poor beast get his wind." But Neighbor Luciano replied: "If I let him go his own pace he'll never earn me my dollar and a dime a day. I've got to mend my own skin with his. When he can't do another stroke I'll sell him to the lime man, for the creature is a good one and will do for him; and it's not true a bit that Saint Joseph's asses are Jonahs. I got him for a crust of bread from Farmer Cirino, now he's come down and is poor."

Then the Saint Joseph's ass fell into the hands of the lime man, who had about twenty donkeys, all thin skeletons just ready to drop, but which managed nevertheless to carry him his little sacks of lime, and lived on mouthfuls of weeds that they could snatch from the roadside as they went. The lime man didn't want him because he was all covered with scars worse than the other beasts, and his legs seared with fire, and his shoulders worn out with the collar, and his withers gnawed by the plow saddle, and his knees broken by his falls, and then that black-and-white skin that in his opinion didn't go at all with his other black animals. "That doesn't matter," replied

Neighbor Luciano, "it'll help you to know your own asses at a distance." And he took off another fifteen cents from the dollar and a half that he had asked, to close the bargain. But even the mistress, who had seen him born, would no longer have recognized the Saint Joseph's ass, he was so changed, as he went with his nose to the ground and his ears like an umbrella, under the little sacks of lime, twisting his behind at the blows from the boy who was driving the herd. But the mistress herself had also changed by then, with the bad times there had been, and the hunger she had felt, and the fevers that they'd all caught down on the plain, she, her husband, and her Turiddu, without any money to buy sulfate, for one hasn't got a Saint Joseph's ass to sell every day, not even for seven dollars.

In winter, when work was scarcer, and the wood for burning the lime was rarer and farther to fetch, and the frozen little roads hadn't a leaf on their hedges, or a mouthful of stubble along the frozen ditchside, life was harder for those poor beasts; and the owner knew that the winter would carry off half of them for him; so that he usually had to buy a good stock of them in spring. At night the herd lay in the open, near the kiln, and the beasts did the best for themselves pressing close up to one another. But those stars that shone like swords penetrated them in their vulnerable parts, in spite of their thick hides, and all their sores and galls burned again and trembled in the cold as if they could speak.

However, there are plenty of Christians who are no better off, and even haven't got that rag of a cloak in which the herd-boy curled himself up to sleep in front of the furnace. A poor widow lived close by — in a hovel even more dilapidated than the lime kiln, so that the stars penetrated through the roof like swords, as if you were in the open, and the wind made the few rags of coverlets flutter. She used to do washing, but it was a lean business, because folk washed their own rags, when they

were washed at all, and now that her boy was grown she lived by going down to the village to sell wood. But nobody had known her husband, and nobody knew where she got the wood she sold; though her boy knew, because he went to glean it here and there, at the risk of being shot at by estate keepers. "If you had a donkey," said the lime man, who wanted to sell the Saint Joseph's ass because it was no longer any good to him, "you could carry bigger bundles to the village, now that your boy is grown."

The poor woman had a dime or two tied in a corner of a handkerchief, and she let the lime man get them out of her, because it is as they say: "Old stuff goes to die in the house of the crazy."

At least the poor Saint Joseph's ass lived his last days a little better, because the widow cherished him like a treasure, thanks to the dimes he had cost her, and she went out at nights to get him straw and hay, and kept him in the hut beside the bed, so that he helped to keep them all warm, like a little fire, he did, in this world where one hand washes the other. The woman, driving before her the ass laden with wood like a mountain, so that you couldn't see his ears, went building castles in the air; and the boy foraged around the hedges and ventured into the margins of the wood to get the load together, till both mother and son imagined themselves growing rich at the trade; till at last the baron's estate keeper caught the boy in the act of stealing boughs and tanned his hide for him thoroughly with a stick. To cure the boy the doctor swallowed up all the cents in the handkerchief, the stock of wood, and all there was to sell, which wasn't much; so that one night when the boy was raving with fever, his inflamed face turned toward the wall, and there wasn't a mouthful of bread in the house, the mother went out raving and talking to herself as if she had got the fever as well; and she went and broke down an almond tree close by,

though it didn't seem possible that she could have managed to do it, and at dawn she loaded it on the ass to go and sell it. But under the weight, as he tried to get up the steep path, the donkey kneeled down really like Saint Joseph's ass before the Infant Jesus, and couldn't get up again.

"Holy Spirits!" murmured the woman. "Oh carry that load of wood for me, you yourselves."

And some passersby pulled the ass by the rope and hit his ears to make him get up.

"Don't you see he's dying," said a carter at last, and so the others left him in peace, since the ass had eyes like a dead fish, and a cold nose, and shivers running over his skin.

The woman thought of her son in his delirium, with his face red with fever, and she stammered:

"Now what shall we do? Now what shall we do?"

"If you want to sell him with all the wood I'll give you forty cents for him," said the carter, who had his wagon empty. And as the woman looked at him with vacant eyes, he added, "I'm only buying the wood, because *that's* all the ass is worth!" And he gave a kick at the carcass, which sounded like a burst drum.