

THEY KNOW HOW TO READ and write — that's the trouble. The white frost of dark winter dawns and the burning dog days of harvesttime fall upon them as upon every other poor devil, since they're made of flesh and blood like their fellow men, and since they've got to go out and watch to see that their fellow man doesn't rob them of his time and of his day's pay. But if you have anything to do with them, they hook you by your name and your surname, and the names of those that begot you and bore you, with the beak of that pen of theirs, and then you'll never get yourself out of their ugly books anymore, nailed down by debt.

“You still owe two bushels of corn from last year.”

“Sir, the harvest was bad.”

"Is it my fault if it doesn't rain? Perhaps I ought to have watered your corn with my drinking glass?"

"Oh, sir, I put my very blood into your land."

"That's what I pay you to do, rascal! I pay you blood for blood. I bleed myself in expenses for the agricultural outlay and then if there comes a bad season, you leave me stuck with the land, while you go off with the sickle under your arm."

And then they say, "A beggar is better off than a proprietor," because you can't take the skin off his back to pay his debts with. That's why the man who has got nothing is forced to pay dearer for his land than others — the owner risks more — and if the harvest turns out poor the half-profits peasant naturally gets none of it, and has to go off with his sickle under his arm. But it is a nasty business, for all that, going off like that after a year's hard work, and with the prospect of a long winter in front of you, with no bread to eat.

Bad times will put the devil into any man. One time, at harvest, such a harvest that you'd think it had been excommunicated by God Himself, the friar on his begging-round rode into Don Piddu's field, kicking his fine bay mule in the belly with his wooden-soled sandals and shouting from the distance, "Hail Jesu and Mary!"

Don Piddu was sitting on a caved-in hamper sadly looking at his meager threshing floor, in the midst of the burned-up stubble of the field, under that sky of fire that he didn't even feel upon his bare head, he was in such a state of despair.

"Oh, the fine bay mule you've got, Fra Giuseppe! She's worth more than all those four old nags put together, that have nothing to thresh and nothing to eat!"

"It's the collections mule," replied Fra Giuseppe. "Praise be to charity toward a fellow man. I've come around to make the collection."

"Lucky for you who reap without sowing, and who go down

to your refectory when the bell rings, and eat your fellow man's charity! I've got five children, and have to find bread for the lot of them. Look what a grand harvest! Last year you got half a measure of corn out of me because Saint Francis had sent me a good crop, and the thanks I get for it is that it hasn't rained anything but fire out of the sky for three months."

Fra Giuseppe wiped the sweat from his own face with his pocket-handkerchief.

"Are you hot, Fra Giuseppe? Then I'll see you get something to cool you, I will!"

And he got four other peasants who were as enraged as himself to give the friar a sousing, turning the creature's long gown over his pate and pouring bucketfuls of green water over him out of the water hole.

"Deuce and damnation!" shouted Don Piddu. "Since it isn't any good giving charity to Christ, I'm going to give it to the devil, next time."

And after that he wouldn't have anymore Capucin friars around his threshing floor, and was satisfied if the brother of Saint Francis of Paola came to make the collection.

Brother Giuseppe put it away in his memory box: "Ah! you wanted to see my drawers, did you, Don Piddu? I'll see you without either drawers or shirt."

He was a great lump of an ugly friar with a mass of beard, and a great thick neck on him as black as a Modica bull, for which reason he was the oracle of the goodwives and the peasants in all the yards and along all the country roads.

"You mustn't have anything to do with Don Piddu. Let me tell you he is excommunicated by God, and his land is accursed."

When the mission preachers came, in the last day of Carnival, for the spiritual discipline of Lent, if there happened to be any sinner or woman of ill repute in the village, or any

other merry person, they went to preach outside his door, in a procession and with the scourge around their necks, for the sins of others. Then Fra Giuseppe pointed out the house of Don Piddu, saying that now nothing went well with him: failure of crops, mortality among his cattle, his wife sick, his daughters all marriageable, handsome, and ready. Donna Saridda, the eldest, was almost thirty, and was still called Donna Saridda so that she shouldn't grow up so fast. At the little party at the mayor's on Shrove Tuesday, she had at last laid hold of a swain, because Pietro Macca, peeping out of the servant's hall, had seen her clasping hands with young Don Giovannino, while they were twirling and figuring in the quadrille. Don Piddu had denied himself the bread of his mouth to take his daughter to the party in a silk dress open in front as low as her heart. Who knows! Straightway came the mission preachers outside the mayor's street door, preaching against temptations, because of all the sin that was going on inside, and the mayor had to have the windows shut to save his glass from being smashed with stones by the people outside.

Donna Saridda went home as pleased as could be, as if she had got the first prize in the lottery safe in her pocket; and she never slept all night, for thinking about Don Giovannino, little suspecting that Fra Giuseppe was saying to him: "Are you mad, your honor, to be entering the family of Don Piddu, when you know he'll be sold up before long!"

Don Giovannino didn't care about the dowry. But the dishonor of the selling up was another pair of shoes. People crowded outside Don Piddu's door to see them carrying out the cupboards and the chests of drawers, which left a white mark upon the wall against which they had stood for so long, and the daughters, pale as wax, had a great job to hide what was happening from their mother, who was ill in bed. She, poor thing, pretended not to know. She had gone beforehand

with her husband to beg and beseech first the lawyer, then the magistrate. "We'll pay tomorrow — we'll pay the day after tomorrow." And they had come back home creeping along close to the wall, she with her face hidden in her cloak — for she was of baronial blood! The day of the sale Donna Saridda, with tears in her eyes, had gone to shut all the windows, because even those who are born with Don before their names are subject to shame. Don Piddu, when out of charity they had taken him as overseer of the fields of Fiumegrande, at harvest-time, when malaria ate up every Christian that came near, he didn't care about the malaria; he only grieved because now, when the peasants disputed with him, they left out the Don and called him plainly *thou*.

But while he has his arms and his health a poor devil can at least earn his bread. Which is what Don Marcantonio Malerba said when he fell into poverty, burdened with children, and his wife, always with child, was forced to go on making bread and preparing the soup and doing the washing and sweeping the rooms. Gentry need so many more things, and they're used to a different way of life. When the children of Don Marcantonio went empty-bellied all day long they never said a word, and the oldest, when his father sent him to buy bread on credit, or a bundle of lettuce, went with his face lowered, at nightfall, hiding the stuff under his patched cloak.

His father turned his hand to anything he could get, in order to earn something, renting a bit of land, or taking it on the half-profits system. He came home on foot from the fields later than anybody else, wrapped in that rag of a shawl belonging to his wife, which he called a *plaid*, and he did his day's brave hoeing like any other man, when nobody was passing along the bridle path.

Then on Sundays he went to be the gentleman along with the others in the club, prattling in a group among the rest of

them with his hands in his pockets and his nose inside the collar of his overcoat; or he played at piquet with his stick between his knees and his hat on his head. At the first sound of midday they all bolted as fast as they could, some in one direction and some in another, and he also went home as if he had a dinner ready waiting for him as well. "What am I to do?" he said. "I can't go out day-laboring, with my children." And the children, now when their father sent them to ask for the loan of half a bushel of buckwheat for seed, or a peck of beans for soup, from Uncle Masi or from Farmer Pinu, they blushed and stammered as if they were already grown up.

When the fire came out of Mount Etna, destroying vineyards and olive groves, then whoever had arms to work had at least no need to starve. But for the gentry who had their land in those parts, it would have been better if the lava had buried them along with their acres, them and their children and everything. The folks who had nothing to lose went out of the village to see the fire, with their hands in their pockets. Today it had taken so-and-so's vineyard, tomorrow it would be in the fields of so-and-so; now it was threatening the bridge of the road, later it encircled the house on the right. Those who were not standing looking on were busying themselves removing tiles, window frames, furniture, clearing the bedrooms, saving what they could, losing their head in the rush and the desperation of the hour, like a disturbed ants' nest.

They brought the news to Don Marco while he was at table with his family, eating a plate of pasta.

"Signor Don Marco, the lava is coming your way, and you'll have it in your vineyards directly." At the sound of this misfortune the fork fell from his hand. The man who looked after the vineyard was carrying away the implements of the wine press, the staves of casks, everything that could be saved, and the wife had gone to fix canes bearing images of the saints

who should protect the place, at the boundaries of the vineyard, mumbling avemarias.

Don Marco arrived exhausted, driving the donkey in front of him, through the dark great cloud that rained down ashes. From the little courtyard in front of the press you could see the black mountain looming over the vineyard, smoking, collapsing here and there, with a rattling of stones as if a mountain of broken pots were slipping down, splitting open to reveal the red fire that was boiling inside it. In the distance the tallest trees shook and rustled in the still air even before they were overtaken; then they smoked and crackled; all at once they blazed and went up in a single flame. They seemed like torches lighted one by one in the dusk of the silent country, along the course of the lava. The wife of the man who looked after the vineyard went around setting a little farther back the canes with the sacred images, but one by one they flared up like matches; and she cried, terrified by all that ruin, thinking that the master wouldn't need a caretaker anymore, and they would be dismissed. And the watchdog also howled before that burning vineyard. The press-house, dismantled and thrown open, roofless, with all that stuff thrown out into the courtyard, in the midst of the frightened countryside, seemed as if it trembled with fear as they removed everything from it previous to abandoning it.

"What are you doing?" Don Marco asked his man, as the latter was trying to save the casks and the implements of the wine press. "Leave it alone. I shall have nothing left now, there'll be nothing to put in the casks."

He kissed the fence of the vineyard for the last time before abandoning it, and he turned back, leading the donkey by the halter.

In God's name! Even gentry have their troubles, and are made of flesh and blood like their neighbors. Poor Donna

Maria, the other daughter of Don Piddu, had flung herself into the arms of the stable boy, having lost all hope of ever getting married, and now they were away in the lonely country, in want and misery. Her parents had kept her without a rag of new clothes to her back, with not so much as a dog to bark after her. In the noon of a hot July day, while the flies were buzzing in the deserted farmyard, and her parents were trying to sleep, with their noses against the wall, she went to look for the lad behind the strawstacks, and he, red and stammering every time she fixed her eyes on him, seized her by the hair to give her a kiss.

Don Piddu almost died of shame. After the sale, after all the misery, he would never have thought he could sink lower. The poor mother came to know of it at the Easter communion. A saint, that woman! Don Piddu was shut up in the Capucin monastery along with all the other gentry of the place, performing the spiritual discipline of the sacred days. The gentry gathered together with their peasants to confess themselves and to hear the evangelical mission; and they paid the expenses of maintenance also, in the hope that the laborers would be converted, and that if they had robbed their masters, they would restore the ill-gotten goods. During those eight days of spiritual discipline, gentry and laborers became brothers again, as in the days of Adam and Eve; and the masters, to show their humility, waited on their farm men at table with their own hands; so that the food went down all the wrong way, in the throats of the laborers, they were so shy and uncomfortable, and in the refectory it was like a stall of cattle, what with the noise of all those jaws working, while the evangelical preachers preached hell and purgatory. Don Piddu didn't want to go that year, not having the money to pay his share, and besides, his laborers couldn't rob anything from him. But the magistrate sent for him, and they made him turn



saint by force, so that he shouldn't set a bad example. Those eight days were a godsend to anybody who had an affair on hand in the house of some poor devil, with no need to fear that the husband might come home unexpectedly from the country to spoil the fun. The door of the monastery was closed to everybody, but the lads who had something to spend slipped out at evening and did not come back till dawn.

Now Don Piddu, after there had come to his ears certain things that Fra Giuseppe had been letting fall, got out secretly one night, as if he was but twenty years old, or as if his lovely was waiting for him, and heaven knows what he went and discovered in his own house. Certainly when he came in again just before dawn he was pale as death, and looked a hundred years older. This time the clandestine traffic had been taken by surprise, and as the young womanizers came creeping back into the monastery, they found the mission padre kneeling outside the door, praying for the sins that others had gone out to commit. Don Piddu also threw himself onto his knees, to confess in the ear of the padre, at the same time weeping all the tears he had in his eyes.

Ah! the thing he had found out, there in his own home! in his daughter's little bedroom where not even the sun could enter! The stable lad escaping through the window; and Maria, pale as death, trying nonetheless to look him in the face, and clinging with desperate arms to the doorpost, to defend her lover. Then there passed before his eyes his other daughter, and his sick wife, the magistrates and the police, in a sea of blood.

"You! You!" he stammered. She trembled all over, this wretched woman, but she did not answer. Then she fell on her knees with her hands clasped, as if she read in his face that she was a parricide. And then he fled with his hands clutching his hair.

But the confessor who counseled him to offer this anguish to God, should really have said to him:

“You see, your honor, when the same trouble falls on other poor folks they keep quiet, because they are poor, and can’t read and write, and can’t let out what they feel without getting sent to the galleys.”