

EVERY TIME HE TOLD THIS tale again, big tears came to Uncle Giovanni's eyes, which seemed quite incredible in his policeman's face.

They had set up the theater in the little square in front of the church: myrtle, oak, and entire branches of olive with all the foliage, showing that nobody had refused to let them take what they wanted for the Mystery Play.

Uncle Memmu, seeing the sexton in his orchard hacking and breaking off whole branches, fairly felt the blows of the hatchet in his stomach and called to him from the distance:

“Nay, aren't you a Christian, Neighbor Calogero, or has the priest never marked you with the holy oil, seeing that you lash at that olive tree without mercy?”

But his wife, really with tears in her eyes, kept trying to calm him down: "It's for the Mystery Play; leave him alone. The Lord will send you a good year for it. Don't you see the young corn dying of thirst?"

Quite yellow, green-yellow like children when they're sick, poor corn! and the earth as white and hard as a crust, eating it away, so that it made your throat burn to look at it.

"This is all Don Angelino's doing," grumbled her husband, "to get his supply of kindling, and lay hands on the offerings money."

Don Angelino the curate had worked like a navy for a week, with the sexton to help him, digging holes, erecting posts, hanging up red paper lanterns, spreading for a background the new curtains belonging to Farmer Nunzio, who had just got married, which made a fine show among the foliage, with the red lanterns in front.

The play was the Flight into Egypt, and the part of Holy Mary was to be played by Neighbor Nanni, who was a small-made man and had had himself clean shaved for the occasion. The moment he appeared, carrying the Infant Jesus at his breast, the latter being Goodwife Menica's little lad, and said to the robbers: "Behold my blood!" the people in the audience began to beat their breasts with stones, and started crying all in one voice, "Have mercy on us, Holy Virgin!"

But Janu and Master Cola, the robbers, in false beards made of lambsskin, took no heed, and insisted on seizing the Sacred Child, to carry him off to Herod. The curate had chosen those two well, for robbers. Real stony-hearted villains they were! — so that Pinto, when he had a lawsuit with Neighbor Janu about the fig tree in the vegetable garden, threw it up at him all the while after, saying: "You are the robber in the Flight into Egypt, you are."

Don Angelino, with the paper in his hand, kept repeating

behind Farmer Nunzio's curtain: "In vain, oh woman, is your prayer; pity does not move me! Pity does not move me — It's your turn, Neighbor Janu." For those two scoundrels had clean forgotten their part, good-for-nothing lot that they were! The Virgin Mary had to go on begging and beseeching them, while folks were muttering in the crowd: "Neighbor Nanni only plays the softy because he's dressed up as Holy Mary. But for that he'd stick the pair of them with that sheath-knife he's got in his pocket."

But as Saint Joseph came on to the scene, with his white cotton beard, going around seeking for his wife in the forest that came up to his breast, the crowd couldn't keep quiet, because the robbers and the Madonna and Saint Joseph could all have touched one another with their hands, if it hadn't been that the Mystery Play said they'd got to go circling around after one another without meeting. And this was the miracle. If the malefactors managed to lay hold of the Madonna and Saint Joseph, both together they'd make mincemeat of them, and of the Infant Jesus as well, God preserve us!

Goodwife Filippa, whose husband was in the galleys for having slaughtered his neighbor in the vineyard with his hoe, because the fellow was stealing his prickly pears, wept like a fountain seeing Saint Joseph chased by the robbers worse than a rabbit, and thought of her husband, when he had come to the little hut in the vineyard absolutely spent, with the police at his heels, and had said to her:

"Give me a drop of water. I'm done for!"

Then they had handcuffed him like Jesus in the garden, and shut him up in the iron cage, to try him, with his bonnet between his hands and his hair absolutely gone like a gray old wig with so many months of prison — you could see it in his eyes as well — as he listened to the judges and witnesses with his yellow prison-face. And when they had taken him away by

sea, on which he had never been before, with his basket over his shoulder, linked up to his galley companions like a string of onions, he had turned around to look at her for the last time, ah with such a face, for he would never see her again, for from the sea nobody ever comes back, and she had never heard any more of him.

“Ah Mother of Sorrows, you know where he is now!” mumbled the live man’s widow as she knelt sitting back on her heels, praying for the poor wretch till she fancied she could see him, there, far off, in the dark. She alone could know what anguish there must be in the heart of the Madonna, at that moment when the robbers were just on the point of seizing Saint Joseph by his cloak.

“Now you see the meeting of the Patriarch Saint Joseph with the malefactors!” said Don Angelino wiping the sweat from his face with his pocket-handkerchief. And Trippa the butcher beat on the big drum — Zum! zum! zum! — to make them understand that the robbers were struggling with Saint Joseph. The goodwives began to scream, and the men picked up stones to flatten the snouts of those two rascals of Janu and Neighbor Cola, shouting, “Leave the patriarch Saint Joseph alone! you pair of villains!” And Farmer Nunzio, for love of his curtain, also started yelling that they were not to burst it. Don Angelino then poked his head out of his den, with his chin unshaved for a week, and worked himself to death trying with hands and voice to calm them:

“Let them be! Let them be! That’s how it’s written in their part.”

A fine part he’d written for them, indeed! and he said moreover it was all his own invention. Really, he would have put Christ on the cross with his own hands, to get the quarter for the mass. Or Neighbor Rocco, a father of five children, hadn’t he had him buried without a scrap of a funeral, because he

couldn't fleece anything from him — there, under the stone floor of the church, at night, in the dark, so that you couldn't even see to lower him into the vault, for eternity! And hadn't he turned Uncle Menico out of his little house, and taken it from him, because it was built on the rock-slope belonging to the church, and had a tithe-rent of a quarter a year on it, which Uncle Menico had never managed to pay? When he had built the cabin for himself, pleased as could be, carrying the stones with his own hands, it never entered his head that one day the curate would have it sold because of those five nickels tithe-rent. The difficulty was to get them together all at once when the tithes were due, and Don Angelino answered him, shrugging his shoulders:

“What am I to do? You see, brother, it's not my property, it's church property.” Just like Master Calogero, the sexton, who repeated: “Serve the altar, and the altar will give you bread.” Now he had hitched himself on to the rope in the belfry and was ringing for all he was worth, while Trippa was beating on the big drum, and the women were yelling, “Miracle! Miracle!”

Here Uncle Giovanni felt the hair rise on his head, as he remembered.

Just a year later, day for day, on the eve of Good Friday, Nanni and Master Cola met in the same place, at night, under the Easter moon, so that it was light as day in the small square. Nanni was squatting behind the church tower, to catch anyone who was going to visit Gossip Venera, whom he had once or twice caught all in a fluster with her dress undone, and had heard someone making off through the garden gate.

“Who was here with you? You'd better tell me. If you like somebody else, I'll leave you to it, and goodnight to the music. But you know, I don't like to have such a thing on my mind.”

She protested it wasn't true, swore by the soul of her

husband, and called the Lord and the Madonna hung at the bed-head to witness, and kissed with crossed hands that very same light-blue cotton petticoat that she had lent to Neighbor Nanni to act the Virgin Mary.

“Be careful! Be careful what you say to me!”

He didn't know that Mistress Venera had been smitten by Master Cola when she saw him playing the robber in the Mystery Play, with his lambswool beard.

“Oh, all right,” he now thought to himself. “If that's the case there's nothing to do but to lie in wait for the rabbit, like a hunter, to make sure with one's own eyes.”

The woman had said to the other man: “Look out for Neighbor Nanni. He's got something into his head, by the way he looks at me, and the way he hunts around the house every time he comes.”

Cola had his mother depending on him, depending for her life on his earnings, so he didn't risk going to Gossip Venera's again — not for one day, two days, three days, nor till the devil tempted him with that moon which came in right to the bed through the cracks in the window frame, and made him have before his eyes all the time the little deserted street, and the widow's house door, at the turning of the small square facing the church tower. Nanni was waiting in the shadow, alone in the square that was all white under the moon, and in a silence such that you could hear the clock of Viagrande chime every quarter of an hour, and the light trotting of the dogs that went sniffing in every corner and rummaging their noses in the street-sweepings. At last a footstep was heard, someone keeping close to the wall, and stopping at the widow's door, to knock softly, once, twice, then more quickly and in a hurry, like someone whose heart beat with desire and fear, and Nanni felt the stranger's knocking strike in his own chest too. Then the door opened

gradually, carefully, with a gap darker than the shadow, and a gun went off.

Master Cola fell, crying, "Mother, oh mother! They're killing me!"

Nobody heard or said anything, for fear of the law; even Gossip Venera herself said she was asleep. Only the mother, hearing the gunshot, felt herself struck through the bowels, and ran just as she was to pick up Cola at the widow's door, crying: "My son! My son!" The neighbors appeared with lights, and the only door that remained shut was the one in front of which the desperate mother continued her imprecations: "Vile woman! Vile woman! You've killed my child for me!"

The mother, on her knees beside her wounded son's bed, prayed to God, clasping her hands hard, hard, her eyes quite dry, so that she looked like a madwoman. "Lord! Lord! My son, Lord!" Ah, what a cruel Easter the Lord had sent her. Exactly on Good Friday, while the procession was passing, with the drum and Don Angelino crowned with thorns! Ah, how black everything was in that house, and through the open door you could see the sun, and the beautiful young cornfields, for that year the folks hadn't had to pray to God for a good season, and so they left Don Angelino to whip himself on the back with the scourge by himself; even when the sexton had gone to get in kindling, pretending it was for the Mystery Play, they had threatened to lame him with stones if he didn't clear out quick.

Only in her house there was weeping, now that everybody was content! Only in her house! She was kept down by the side of that poor bed like a bundle of rags, broken, become all at once decrepit, her gray hair hanging about her face. And she heard none of those who filled the room out of curiosity. She saw nothing but the dulled eyes of her child, and his pinched nose. They had fetched the doctor to him; and they had brought Goodwife Barbara, the lucky woman, and the

poor mother had contrived to find the twenty-five cents to have Don Angelino say a mass for him.

The doctor shook his head. "It'll take more than Don Angelino's mass," said the goodwives. "You want the blessed cotton of Fra Sanzio of Valverde, which performs miracles all over the place."

The wounded man, with the blessed cotton on his abdomen, and the candle before his yellow face, opened wide his dimmed eyes, looking at the neighbors one after the other, and tried to smile at his mother, with his pale lips, to let her know that he was really feeling better, with that miraculous cotton on his stomach. He nodded with his head, with that sad, sad smile of a dying man who says he feels better. The doctor however said no; that he wouldn't live the night through. And Don Angelino, not to have the value of his goods run down, repeated:

"It takes faith to perform miracles. Saints, and relics, and the blessed cotton are all excellent things when you have faith."

The poor mother had plenty of faith, she spoke really heart to heart with the saints and the Madonna, and said to the blessed candle, rapidly, quickly, through her shut teeth: "Lord! Lord! Grant me this mercy! Leave me my child, Lord!" And her son listened, intent, with his eyes fixed on the candle, and he tried to smile, to nod and say yes, he did.

All the village crazy to know the ins and outs of that deed; but the only one who was in the know was Mrs. Venera. As for her she might have been deeper in than ever if she had had to reckon with the blood that was found in the square, for Master Cola, gasping and staggering, had gone to fall precisely in the place where he'd played the robber in the Mystery Play the year before. However Mrs. Venera had to leave the village, because nobody would buy her bread-cakes anymore, and they



called her the "excommunicated woman." Neighbor Nanni also lived on for a time, lurking here and there among the rocks and the fields, but at the first cold of winter they caught him one night near the first houses of the village, where he was waiting for the boy who used to bring him bread in secret. They tried him and sent him beyond the sea, to be with the husband of Goodwife Filippa.

Well for him, if he had never thought of putting on the "excommunicated woman's" petticoat to play the Blessed Virgin.