

THE LITTLE GIRL APPEARED in the doorway twisting the corner of her apron between her fingers, and said, "I've come."

Then as nobody took any notice of her, she began to look timidly from one to the other of the village wives who were kneading up the bread, and added: "They told me, 'You go to Neighbor Sidora's.'"

"Come on, come on," cried Goodwife Sidora, red as a tomato as she turned from the oven hole. "Wait and I'll make you a nice bread-cake."

"That means they're bringing the extreme unction to Neighbor Nunzia, if they've sent the child away," observed the Licodia goodwife.

One of the women who was helping to knead the bread turned her head around, keeping on working with her fists in the kneading trough all the time, her arms bare to the elbows, and asked the child:

“How is your stepmother?”

The child didn't know the woman, so she looked at her with wide eyes, and then lowering her head again, and rapidly, nervously twisting the corner of her apron, she mumbled in a low tone:

“She's in bed.”

“Don't you hear there's the Host in the house?” replied the Licodia woman. “Now the neighbors have begun to lament around the door.”

“When I've got the bread in the oven,” said Neighbor Sidora, “I shall run across for a minute myself to see if they're not wanting anything. Master Meno will lose his right arm if this wife dies as well.”

“There's some who have no luck with their wives, like others who are always unlucky with their cattle. As many as they get they are bound to lose. Look at Goodwife Angela!”

“Last night,” added the Licodia woman, “I saw Neighbor Meno standing on his doorstep, come home from the vineyard before Ave Maria, and he was wiping his nose with his handkerchief.”

“Yet you know,” added the gossip who was kneading the bread, “he's a blessed good hand at killing off his wives. In less than three years this makes two daughters of Shepherd Nino that he's finished off, one after the other! Wait a bit, and he'll do for the third one, and then he'll get everything that belongs to Shepherd Nino.”

“But is this child here Neighbor Nunzia's daughter, or is she by the first wife?”

“She's by the first wife. And the second one was as fond of

her as if she were her own child, because the little orphan was her niece."

The child, hearing them speaking about her, began to cry quietly in a corner, to ease her aching heart, which she had kept still up till then by fidgeting with her apron.

"Come here then, come here," said Neighbor Sidora again. "The bread-cake is all nice and done. There, don't you cry, your mamma is in paradise."

Then the child wiped her eyes with her fists, the more readily because Neighbor Sidora was just setting about to open the oven.

"Poor Neighbor Nunzia!" a neighbor woman came saying in the doorway. "The grave diggers have set off just now. They've just this minute gone past."

"Save us from it! I am a daughter of Holy Mary!" exclaimed the goodwives crossing themselves.

Goodwife Sidora took the bread-cake from the oven, dusted the ashes off it, and gave it fiery hot to the child, who took it in her pinafore and went off with it very quietly, blowing on it.

"Where are you going?" Goodwife Sidora shouted after her. "You stop here. There's a bogeyman at home, with a black face, and he runs off with folks."

The orphan child listened very seriously, opening wide her eyes. Then she answered with the same obstinate little voice:

"I'm going to take it to Mamma."

"Your mother's gone away. You stop here," repeated the neighbor. "You stop here and eat your bread-cake."

Then the child squatted on the doorstep, so unhappy, holding her bread-cake in her hands without thinking about it.

All at once, seeing her father approaching she got up quickly and ran to meet him. Neighbor Meno entered without saying anything, and sat in a corner with his hands hanging between

his knees, long-faced, his lips white as paper, not having taken a mouthful of food since yesterday, he was so brokenhearted. He looked around at the women as if to say: I'm in a sad way!

The women, seeing him with his black kerchief around his neck, surrounded him in a circle, their hands still white with flour, sympathizing with him in chorus.

"Don't talk to me, Neighbor Sidora," he repeated, shaking his head and heaving his shoulders. "This is a thorn that'll never come out of my heart! A real saint that woman! I didn't deserve her, if I may say so. Even yesterday, bad as she was, she got up to see to the foal that is just weaned. And she wouldn't let me fetch the doctor so as not to spend money nor buy medicine. I shall never find another wife like her. You mark my word! Leave me alone and let me cry. I've reason to!"

And he kept shaking his head and swelling his shoulders, as if his trouble was heavy on him.

"As for finding another wife," added the Licodia woman to cheer him up, "you've only to look around for one."

"No! no!" Neighbor Meno kept repeating, with his head down like a mule. "I shall never find another wife like her. This time I'll stop a widower. I'm telling you."

Goodwife Sidora lifted up her voice: "Don't you talk rash, it doesn't do! You ought to look around for another wife, if for no other reason but out of regard for this poor little orphan, else who's going to look after her, when you're away in the country! You don't want to leave her in the middle of the road?"

"You find me another wife like her if you can! She didn't wash herself so as not to dirty any water, and she waited on me in the house better than a manservant, loving and so faithful she wouldn't have robbed me of a handful of beans from the shed, and she never as much as opened her mouth to say, 'You give me this!' And then a fine dowry with it all, stuff worth its weight in gold! And now I've got to give it back, because there

are no children! The sexton told me just now he was coming with the holy water. And how fond she was of that little thing there, because she reminded her of her poor sister! Any other woman, who wasn't her aunt, would have cast the evil eye on her, poor little orphan."

"If you take the third daughter of Shepherd Nino everything will come all right, for the orphan and the dowry," said the Licodia woman.

"That's what I say myself! But don't talk to me, for my mouth is bitter as gall."

"That's not the way to be talking now," seconded Goodwife Sidora. "Better take a mouthful of something to eat, Neighbor Meno, for you're at your last gasp."

"No! no!" Neighbor Meno kept repeating. "Don't talk to me about eating, I've got a knot in my throat."

Neighbor Sidora put before him on a stool the hot bread with black olives, a piece of sheep's cheese, and the flask of wine. And the poor fellow began to munch slowly, slowly, keeping on mumbling with his long face.

"Such bread," he observed, becoming moved to tenderness. "Such bread as she made, the poor departed soul, there wasn't her like for it. It was as soft as meal, it was! And with a handful of wild fennel she'd make you a soup that would make you lick your fingers after it. Now I shall have to buy my bread at the shop, from that thief of a Master Puddo, and I shall get no more hot soup, every time I come home wet through like a new hatched chicken. And I shall have to go to bed on a cold stomach. Even the other night, while I was sitting up with her, after I'd been hoeing all day breaking up the lumps on the slope, and I heard myself snoring, sitting beside the bed, I was so tired, the poor soul said to me: 'Go and eat a spoonful. I've left the soup for you warm by the fire.' And she was always thoughtful for me, at home, mindful of whatever there was to

be done, this, that, and the other, so that she could never have done talking about it, telling me her last advice, like one who is setting off for a long journey, and I hearing her all the time murmuring when I was half asleep and half awake. And she went happy into the otherworld, with her crucifix on her breast, and her hands folded over it. She's got no need of rosaries and masses, saint that she is! The money for the priest would be money thrown away."

"It's a world of troubles!" exclaimed the neighbor woman. "And now Goodwife Angela's donkey, just close here, is going to die of indigestion."

"My troubles are worse than that!" wound up Neighbor Meno wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "No, don't make me eat any more, for every mouthful goes down into my stomach like lead. Better you eat, poor innocent child who doesn't understand anything. Now you'll have nobody to wash you and comb your hair. Now you'll have no mother to keep you under her wing like a mother hen, and you are lost as I am. I found you that one, but another stepmother like her you'll never have, my child!"

The little girl, all moved, pushed out her lips again and put her fists in her eyes.

"No, you can't do no less, I say," repeated Gossip Sidora. "You've got to look for another wife, out of regard for this poor little orphan who'd be left on the streets."

"And me, how am I left? And my young foal, and my house, and who's going to see to the fowls? Let me weep, Neighbor Sidora! I'd better have died myself, instead of that poor soul who's gone."

"Be quiet now, you don't know what you're saying, and you don't know what it means, a home without a master!"

"Ay, that's true enough!" agreed Neighbor Meno, somewhat comforted.

“Just think of poor Goodwife Angela, if you like! First she’s lost her husband, then her big son, and now her donkey is dying as well!”

“If the donkey’s got indigestion, he’d better be bled under the girth,” said Neighbor Meno.

“You come and look at it, you understand about it,” added the goodwife, “You’ll be doing a work of charity for the soul of your wife.”

Neighbor Meno got up to go to Goodwife Angela’s, and the orphan ran after him like a chicken, now she had no one else in the world. Gossip Sidora, good housewife, reminded him:

“And what about the house? How are you leaving it, now there’s nobody in it?”

“I’ve locked the door; and then Cousin Alfia lives just opposite, to keep an eye on it.”

The ass of Neighbor Angela was stretched out in the middle of the courtyard, with his nose cold and his ears drooping, struggling from time to time with his four hoofs in the air, while the pains contracted his sides like a big pair of bellows. The widow, sitting before him on the stones, with her hands clutching her gray hair, and her eyes dry and despairing, watched him, pale as a dead woman.

Neighbor Meno began to walk around the animal, touching its ears, looking into its eyes, and as he saw that the blood was still flowing from the side, black, drop by drop, collecting at the ends of the bristly hairs, he asked:

“Then they have bled him?”

The widow fixed her gloomy eyes on his face without replying, and nodded her head.

“Then there’s nothing more to be done,” concluded Neighbor Meno, and he stood there watching the ass stretch itself out on the stones, rigid, with its hair all ruffled like a dead cat.

"It's the will of God, sister!" he said to comfort her. "We are both of us ruined, both of us."

He had seated himself on the stones beside the widow, with his little girl between his knees, and they were silent all of them watching the poor creature beating the air with its hoofs, from time to time, just like a dying man.

When Gossip Sidora had finished taking the bread from the oven she too came into the courtyard, along with Cousin Alfia, who had put on her new dress, and her silk kerchief on her head, to come for a minute's chat, and Gossip Sidora said to Neighbor Meno, drawing him aside: "Shepherd Nino won't be willing to give you the other daughter, seeing that they die like flies with you, and he loses the dowry if he does. And then Santa is too young, and there's the danger that she'd fill your house with children."

"If only they were boys, never mind! But what there is to fear is that they'd be girls. I'm a downright unfortunate man."

"There's always Cousin Alfia. She isn't so young as she was, and she's got her own bit, her house and a piece of vineyard."

Neighbor Meno turned his eyes on Cousin Alfia, who was pretending to look at the ass, with her hands on her hips, and he concluded:

"If that's how it is, we can talk about it after. But I'm a downright unlucky man."

Goodwife Sidora up and said:

"Think of those that are worse off than you, think of them."

"There aren't any, I tell you! I shall never find another wife like her! I shall never be able to forget her, not if I marry ten times more! Neither will this poor little orphan forget her."

"Be quiet, you'll forget her. And the child as well will forget her. Hasn't she forgotten her own true mother? You just look at Neighbor Angela, now her donkey is dying! And she's got nothing else! She, yes, she'll always remember it."

Cousin Alfia saw it was time for her to put in too, with a long face, and she began again the praising of the dead woman. She had arranged her in the coffin with her own hands, and put a handkerchief of fine linen on her face. Because she had plenty of linen and white things, though she said it herself. Then Neighbor Meno, touched, turned to Neighbor Angela, who never moved, no more than if she was made of stone, and said:

“Well, now what are you waiting for, why don’t you have the ass skinned? At least get the money for the hide.”