

*THE GUT OF NAPLES*

by

Matilde Serao  
(1884)

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*For Marius Kociejowski*

*To the Baroness Giulia de Rothschild  
Pavillon de Pregny, Geneva*

*My lady and my friend,*

*You have loved and you continue to love Naples with an ardent heart as well as a high and enlightened mind. The desire for good that you cultivate for that admirable city is a living part of all the good found in your spirit.*

*Only to you, then, do I wish to dedicate this book of tenderness, pity and sadness—for Naples.*

*May you feel affection for your friend,*

*Matilde Serao*

This book was written in three different moments.<sup>1</sup>

The first part was completed in 1884, when from Naples the full sense of horror, terror and pity for the scourge then sweeping across the city, spreading disease and death, reached me in a distant land. The pain, anxiety and concern that dominated in me every attempt at art should speak to how deeply my Neapolitan heart must have suffered then.

The second part was written twenty years later, that is to say, only two years ago. It reconnects with the first part, but is more serene although, alas, less hopeful and more skeptical that a better social and civic future will ever be granted to the people of Naples, of whom this author feels honored and privileged to be part.

The third part belongs to yesterday and today. I do not have to explain it, for it is like the others: the expression of a sincere heart and a sincere soul, an expression at once tender and pained, a nostalgic and sad expression of an ideal of justice and pity, that ought to spread over the people of Naples, elevating and exalting them!

Naples, Autumn 1905

Matilde Serao

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: this translation is of the 1884 first edition of *Il ventre di Napoli* only. The second part, added twenty years later, is a scathing dissection of the politics of fin-de-siècle urban renewal in Naples, of interest above all to historians who likely already can read the Italian original. The third part adds a collection of occasional pieces that Serao had published in newspapers in the intervening years, providing further portraits of the inhabitants and the popular culture of Naples.

### Naples must be gutted

Although that sentence of yours was an effective one, Honorable Depretis, you did not know the gut of Naples. You were in the wrong, because you are the government and the government must know everything. Brief and colorful little descriptive passages written by journalists with literary ambitions are certainly not made for the government, for these speak of the Via Caracciolo, the silvery sea, the cobalt sky, enchanting ladies and the violet mists of the sunset. All of this hollow rhetoric based on the Gulf and the hills in flower, for which, Honorable Depretis, we have made and continue to make amends, kneeling humbly before our suffering homeland; all of this small-scale and facile literature of fragments serves that part of the public that does not wish to be bothered by tales of poverty. But the government should have known about the *other part*; that same government to which the statistics concerning mortality and crime rates are sent; that government to which prefects, questors, police inspectors, and delegates make their reports; that same government to which the chief prison wardens make their reports; that same government that knows everything; [such as] how much meat is consumed in one day and how much wine is drunk in one year or in one town; how many unfortunate females—let's call them that—may exist, and how many of their true loves are men already well known to the police; how many beggars cannot gain entrance to the charity shelters and how many vagabonds may sleep at night in the streets; how many indigents and how many merchants there may be; how much does the tax on consumption bring in, how much do land holdings provide, how much is pawned at the Monte di Pietà and *how much does the lottery make*. This other part, the very gut of Naples, who should know it if not the government? And if they cannot tell you everything, then what are all these government employees good for, whether high- or low-ranking? And for what purpose does this immense

bureaucratic machine, which costs us so much, exist? And if you are not the supreme intelligence of our country, knowing all and dealing with all, then why are you a government minister?

They must have shown you one, two or three streets in the poor quarters of the city center, and you must have been horrified. But you did not see everything. The Neapolitans who showed you around do not know *all* of the poor neighborhoods. Did you visit all of the *Via dei Mercanti*?

This street must be four meters wide, so that carriages cannot pass through, and it is winding, twisted like an intestine. Even on the most beautiful days, very tall buildings immerse it in a dull, dead light. In the middle of the street there is a stream that is merely mire, black and fetid and stagnant; the water is full of filth and filthy soapsuds, cooking water for pasta and soup, a stinking blend that turns putrid. In the *Via dei Mercanti*, which is one of the main streets in the Porto quarter, there is everything: dark shops selling everything, in which shadows flicker; pawn shops; lottery ticket counters; and every so often a narrow black doorway, every so often a muddy blind alleyway, every so often a deep fryer from which emanates the stench of rancid oil; every so often a grocery shop emitting a stench of fermenting cheese and decaying lard.

Many other lanes lead off from this street, bearing the names of the arts and crafts: the Shoemakers, the Knifsmiths, the Swordsmiths, the Taffeta-makers, the Mattress-makers, and so on. The only difference between these lanes and the *Via dei Mercanti* is that they are much narrower, although equally dark and dirty; each of them stinks in a different way, whether of old leather, molten lead, nitric or sulphuric acid.

Various streets lead down from the upper city to the Porto quarter; these are extremely steep, narrow and poorly paved. *Via di Mezzocannone* is full of dyers, and in the back of every dark-brown shop there burns a lively fire underneath a large black cauldron where half-naked men stir a smoking brew; red and purple rags are drying on the doorstep; multicolored scum always flows along the broken pavement. Another street, the so-called *Gradelle di Santa Barbara*, also has its special features: on both sides live unfortunate women who have made it one of their domains, and, out of the indolence of the unhappily unemployed by day, and out of dark hatred of men, they throw fig and watermelon peels, garbage, and corncocks onto passers-by; and it all stays on

these steps, so that clean people no longer dare to pass that way. There is another street, behind the San Marcellino school, that leads to Portanova, where the Via dei Mercanti ends and the Via dei Lanzieri begins. In truth this is not a street but rather a blind alley, a sort of blackish canal that passes beneath two arches and in which seems to be gathered all the garbage of an African village. There, at a certain point, one can proceed no further: the ground is slippery and the stomach starts to heave.

Have you been in the Vicaria quarter?

Of all of the streets that traverse it, only one is clean: the Via del Duomo. All of the others represent the old Naples, drowned and dark, with propped-up houses that are collapsing with age. There is an alley called the Vicolo del Sole, whose name comes from the fact that sunlight never enters there. Another alley is called the Vicolo del Settimo Cielo because of the great height of a little strip of the sky that can be seen between the very tall and very old buildings. Around the Piazzetta dei SS. Apostoli you will find three or four small streets—Grotta della Marra, Santa Maria a Vertecoeli, and Vicolo della Campana—in which dwells a thin and pallid populace, sickened by the tobacco factory there as well as by their own filth. And, of this great and historic Vicaria quarter, all of the area surrounding Castelcapuano seems to be precisely *its* setting, that is to say, material and moral rotteness, on which arises the extreme consequence of this impoverished and necessarily corrupt society: the prison.

The Mercato? Ah, yes. The historic place where Masaniello led his revolution and where Conradin of Swabia was beheaded. Yes, yes, the playwrights and poets have talked about it. Coming by carriage from the train station, one crosses its edge but comes out right away at the Marina. The hell with poetry and drama! Here around the Mercato not a single street is clean; it seems as though the street sweeper has not passed this way in years; and yet it is perhaps the dirt of only a single day.

Here is the Lavinaio, the great fountain in which all of the filthy rags of old and poor Naples are washed. The Lavinaio is a broad stream in which filth can only be superficially cleansed, so much so that one may say “you’re truly from the Lavinaio” in order to insult good-naturedly a Neapolitan

by using a turn of phrase from his own language. In the Mercato quarter *seven* alleys together form the "Duchesca" neighborhood; I read in a published dispatch that, in just one of these alleys, thirty cases of cholera were reported in a single hour; there is the alley known as "Cavalcatio"; there is another alley called "Sant'Angelo a Baiano." As I am a woman, I cannot tell you what these streets are like, because their abjectness is so great and so pitiable, and human nature is degraded to such a degree, that shame blazes across my face.

Gut Naples? Do you think that will be enough? Aren't you flattering yourself if you think that running three or four new streets through these poor neighborhoods will suffice to save them? You'll see, you'll see, when the preliminary studies have been completed for this holy work of redemption, the refulgent truth that will emerge: *they must be rebuilt*.

You surely cannot leave standing houses that are damaged by humidity, with mud on the ground floor and where, on the top floor, it is broiling hot in summer and freezing cold in winter; where the stairways are repositories for rubbish; into whose wells, from which water is drawn with such laborious effort, ends up all man-made refuse and dead animals; and all of these houses have a place into which all sorts of things get thrown, namely a so-called *vinella* [n.t. aka *vanella*] or cramped interior courtyard used by servant-women to toss away everything; whose system of latrines—when there is one—is resistant to any sort of disinfection.

You cannot leave standing houses in which never fewer than four persons are crammed into each small room, where there live hens and pigeons, worn-out cats and leprous dogs; houses in which the inhabitants cook in a cubbyhole, eat in the bedroom, and die in the same room in which others are sleeping and eating; houses beneath whose stairs live human beings, although these spaces resemble the old *criminal* prisons of the Vicaria quarter, which were below ground level and have now been abolished.

You surely cannot leave standing the overbridges connecting and propping up the houses on either side of a given alley; nor those sorry wooden structures hanging down off of the outer walls of certain houses; nor those narrow little doorways; nor those blind alleys or dark alleyways; nor those buttresses. You cannot leave standing the slum dwellings [*fondaci*].

You surely cannot leave standing certain houses on whose second floor there is a pawnshop, on whose third floor rooms are rented out to students, and on whose fourth floor fireworks are manufactured; or certain other houses where there is a pool/billiards hall on the ground floor, a hotel on the second floor with rooms that cost three *soldi* a night, on the third floor live many unfortunate women, and the fourth floor is used to store rags.

In order to destroy both the material and moral corruption, in order to refashion the health and conscience of these poor people, to teach them how to live—for they do know how to die, as you have seen!—and to tell them that they are our brothers whom we love very much and want to save, it is not enough to gut Naples: almost all of it needs to be rebuilt.

## What they earn

Yet the people who live in these four poor neighborhoods, without fresh air, sunlight, or hygiene, while splashing through blackish streams, clambering over mountains of rubbish, breathing the pestilent stench and drinking tainted water, are not wild, idle and brutish; their religious faith is not gloomy, vice does not run deep in them, and their misfortune does not make them irascible.

Thanks to their innate benevolence, the poor of Naples love white houses and hills: on All Saints' Day, when all good folk take floral wreaths from Naples to the hill cemetery of Poggioreale, which is full of flowers, birds, sweet scents, and marble, there are those who have heard people exclaim: "Oh Jesus, I'd like to die in order to be here!" [*"Gesù, vurria muri, pe sta ccà!"*].

These poor people love cheerful colors, decorate cart-horses with a variety of tassels, and on holidays decorate their own persons with multicolored plumes, wear scarlet handkerchiefs around their necks, will place a tomato on top of a sack of flour in order to create a pictorial effect, and have created a monument made out of shiny brass ware, painted wood, glasses and bottles, and fragrant lemons, a little monument that is a feast for the eyes—*the water-vendor's stand*.

These poor people both love and make music, they sing so lovingly and yet with such melancholy, so much so that their songs make your heart ache and provoke the most unconquerable nostalgia in those who are far away from home, and offer an expansive sentimentality that radiates through musical harmony.

They are not therefore a race of animals who revel in the mud; they are not an inferior race that prefers the worst of the worst and willfully seeks out filth; they do not deserve the fate that things have imposed on them; they would know how to appreciate civilization, given that they have assimilated right away that little bit of it that has been bestowed on them; they would deserve to be happy.

They live down there [in the old city] because they have no choice. Their poverty is constitutive, organic, and so intense and so deep that not even one hundred public charitable institutions would

manage to vanquish it, nor would private charity, which comes and goes, be capable of defeating it; mind you, theirs is not the poverty of the shiftless but the poverty of the laborer, the poverty of the worker, the poverty of those who toil fourteen hours a day.

This laborer, this worker, cannot afford to pay more than fifteen lire per month for rent: and that would be a fortunate worker, for there are those who pay ten lire, seven lire, *five* lire in rent—and the latter form the vast majority of the poor of Naples. Some years ago, near Capodimonte a cooperative organization built a phalanstery, including worker housing. The homes were clean, bright, and rather small but sanitary: although prices were kept low, the association could not manage to rent out the flats for less than thirty-four lire per month.

Not one ordinary laborer went to live there.

Office workers with families, some pensioners, and impecunious young married couples moved there instead: in short, members of the lower middle class who want to mask their own lack of means and have a marble staircase.

This large building still stands there today as proof of Neapolitan poverty. Indeed, the self-respect of the scrupulous and presumptuous bourgeois persons who live there was so wounded by the accusation that they had taken up residence in worker housing that they had the following words painted in big letters over the main entrance: *The units in this Cooperative are not worker housing.* What a cruel and arrogant claim.

Thirty-four lire? A Neapolitan laborer earns thirty-four lire in a month, and those who bring home one lira every day consider themselves to be fortunate.

Wages are extremely low in almost all professions and trades. Naples is the place where, as everyone knows, typography costs the least: typographers are paid one third less than in other cities. The same typographical work that is paid five lire in Milan, or four lire in Rome, is in Naples only worth two lire. Indeed, in this blessed and unhappy city certain almost penniless little newspapers are more easily born and live that elsewhere would not manage to publish even three

issues before closing. Tailors, cobblers, masons and carpenters are paid similarly badly; one lire, twenty-five or at most thirty *soldi* per day, for twelve hours of sometimes extremely hard work.<sup>i</sup> Glove cutters earn ninety cents per day. And keep in mind that the elegant youth of Naples is the best-dressed in Italy: and that Naples is where the most beautiful shoes and the most beautiful low-cost furniture are made; keep in mind too that Naples produces the best gloves. The wages for other lesser trades are seventy-five cents, twelve *soldi*, ten *soldi*. For this reason, these laborers cannot pay more than five, seven or ten lire per month in rent; and because poverty looms large, women, wives and mothers—all of whom have already given birth, and nursed, many times: all of those who ought to work at home—must seek work outside the home.

Lucky are those women who find a job at the tobacco factory, or those who know how to work and manage to contract themselves out as seamstresses, milliners, or florists! Wages are below poverty level—fifteen, seventeen, twenty lire per month—but this seems like a godsend to them. There are, however, few such women in Naples: all the rest of the immense class of impoverished female workers must seek employment as domestics.

Neapolitan maidservants contract themselves out for ten lire per month, without any midday meal included: in the morning they must walk two or three miles from home to their place of employment, go up and down the stairs forty times per day, draw twenty buckets of water from a deep well, take on the most physically exhausting tasks, not eat at all during the day and, in the evening, drag themselves home like a worn-out shadow. There are women who hold two half-time jobs as domestics, for six lire each, racing continually from one home to the other, and are continually rebuked for their tardiness. I met one such woman: her name was Annarella, and she “*did*” three homes per day, for five lire each: by evening she was dazed, “*wouldn't eat*,” dead tired with fatigue, sometimes not even getting undressed in order to fall asleep right away.

These domestics also find time to nurse a child and to knit, but they are monstrous-looking beings, and one gazes on them with as much pity as repugnance. They're thirty years old but look to be fifty; they're bent over, have lost their hair, their teeth have turned yellow and black, they walk like cripples, and they wear the same dress for four years and the same apron for six months.

Before they turn forty, without complaint or tears they go off to the poorhouse to die of malaria, pneumonia, or some other horrid illness. How many of them died of cholera!

And all the other itinerant trades for women—doing hair, washing or ironing clothes, selling street food like *spassatiempo*, re-weaving straw or wicker chairs [*mpagliaseggie*]<sup>2</sup>—which expose them to every sort of weather, to every possible kind of mishap, and to a host of diseases, not only constitute physically demanding or loathsome jobs, but do not allow these unfortunates to earn more than ten or fifteen *soldi* per day. When they earn one lira per day, the poor wretches put money aside and get married.

It's true that they are ugly: it's even truer that they neglect themselves: sometimes they are downright disgusting. But any genuine lover of the plastic arts<sup>2</sup> ought to enter into the secret world of these existences, which are a poem of daily martyrdom, incalculable sacrifice, and hard labor borne without complaint. Youth, beauty, clothes? They had a moment of beauty and youth, they were loved, they married: afterward came a husband and poverty, hard work and hard knocks, labor-pangs and hunger. They have children but must abandon them, with the smallest one entrusted to a younger sister, and—like all other mothers—they fear carriages in the street, fire, dogs and falls. While toiling as domestic servants, they are always worried and anxious.

One of these women comes to mind. She had three children, including especially a little boy who was strikingly beautiful. Although he was already two years old, she continued to nurse him, for she had nothing else to give him to eat: the child would sit on the front stair of their ground floor dwelling [*basso*] and wait for her return every evening. The physician from the public health service told her: “wean him off your milk or he'll fall ill.” She bowed her head: she couldn't wean the boy. One day he came down with typhoid fever and died. As she was peeling potatoes in a kitchen where she worked, she bemoaned his loss, murmuring: “*My son, my son, it had to be me who killed you, it had to be me who made you die! O what a terrible mother I've been! My son, who will wait for me now in the evening in front of my door?*”

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<sup>2</sup> See the chapter on “The Picturesque,” in which Serao objects to the exploitation of the poor of Naples by artists who use their miserable conditions of existence as subject-matter.

And what about child labor? Alas, these mothers are very happy when a coachman for some wealthy person wants to take their twelve-year-old boy as an apprentice, although the child will be given nothing other than something to eat; they're very happy when the master of a workshop takes their boy in, making him work like a dog and giving him only soup in the evening; his compassionate mother gives him one *soldo* with which to buy his breakfast in the morning.

Seamstresses, milliners, florists, and corset-makers take twelve-year-old girls as apprentices; in reality these girls are just little servants who earn five *soldi* per week. For the most part, however, these children stay at home or in the street all day long.

In the countryside a child is a joy, a helper, and a source of prosperity; in Naples he or she represents one more thing about which to worry, maternal suffering, and a source of tears and hunger.

Listen carefully when a Neapolitan working woman refers to her own children. She calls them her *little ones*, and she says it with such melancholy sweetness, with such maternal compassion, with such painful love, that you will feel as though you yourself know keenly and fully the depths of poverty in Naples.

## What they eat

One day, a Neapolitan businessman had an idea. Knowing that pizza is a culinary favorite in Naples, and knowing that there is a vast colony of Neapolitans in Rome, he thought to open a pizzeria in Rome. The copper saucepans and pastry pans sparkled, and the oven was always lit; all kinds of pizza could be found there: pizza with tomato, pizza with mozzarella and cheese, pizza with anchovies and oil, and pizza with oil, oregano and garlic. At first the crowds rushed there; but then they slowly dwindled. Once removed from its Neapolitan setting, pizza seemed out of place, and represented only a stomach-ache; its star waned and faded away in Rome; an exotic plant, it perished amid this Roman solemnity.

In fact, it's true: pizza is included in the broad category of foodstuffs costing one *soldo* that are eaten for lunch or dinner by a very large number of the poor of Naples.

During the night the pizza maker produces in his shop a great many of these rounds of thin, flat, dense dough, burnt on the outside but not cooked all the way through, and laden with nearly raw tomato, garlic, pepper and oregano: these pizzas, cut up into so many slices to be sold for a *soldo*, are entrusted to a boy who goes out to sell his wares on some street corner, where he displays them on top of a pushcart; he stays there almost all day, with these slices of pizza that freeze in the cold, turn yellow in the sun, and are eaten by flies. There are also slices sold for two cents [*centesimi*] to schoolchildren; into the evening the pizza maker resupplies the pushcart whenever the stock runs out.

In the evening there are also boys who walk the alleyways carrying on their head a big convex tin shield loaded with these slices of pizza. With a special cry, they tell the neighborhood that they have pizza with tomato and with garlic, with mozzarella, and with salted anchovies. Poor women seated on the step in front of their ground floor dwelling [*basso*] buy some slices and dine or lunch, that is to say, have their meal for the day, with one *soldo's* worth of pizza.<sup>ii</sup>

For one *soldo*, the poor of Naples have a rather wide selection of foods for their day's meal. A small paper cone containing little fried fish—known as *fragaglia*—that come from the bottom of the fishmongers' baskets may be purchased from a vendor of fried foods; four or five *panzarotti* may be had for one *soldo* from the same vendor; these little fritters contain a bit of artichoke, when no one can stand another artichoke, or a small cabbage core, or a tiny piece of anchovy. For one *soldo* an old woman sells nine boiled chestnuts, stripped of their outer shell and swimming in a reddish juice; the poor of Naples soak their bread in this liquid and eat the chestnuts as a main course. For one *soldo* another old woman, dragging behind her a cart with a cauldron, sells two boiled ears of sweet corn. For one *soldo* the tavern-keeper sells a portion of *scapece*: composed of squash or eggplant fried in oil and seasoned with vinegar, pepper, oregano, cheese, and tomato, *scapece* is displayed on the street in a large, deep jar into which it is packed like a preserve, and from which it is scooped out with a spoon. The poor of Naples bring with them a hunk of bread, which they cut in half before the tavern-keeper pours the *scapece* over it. For one *soldo* he also sells a portion of *spiritosa*, which consists of slices of boiled yellow parsnips soaked in a strong-tasting sauce made of vinegar, pepper, oregano, garlic and chilli peppers.<sup>iii</sup> The tavern-keeper stands at the doorway and cries: "Our *spiritosa* smells so fine today!" ["*Addorosa, addorosa, 'a spiritosa!*"]. Naturally, all of these foods are extremely spicy, so as to satisfy even the most jaded Southern Italian palate.

As soon as they have two *soldi*, the poor of Naples buy a plate of hot pasta with sauce. In every street of the city's four poor neighborhoods, there is one of these taverns with a cook's stall set up outdoors, in which pasta is always on the boil, tomato sauce is always bubbling in saucepans, and there are mountains of grated spicy *cacio* cheese that comes from Crotone.

Above all, this set-up is very picturesque, and some painters have made paintings of it, rendering it to appear clean and almost elegant, with the tavern-keeper looking like one of Watteau's shepherds. And, in those sets of photographs of Naples that the English buy, the pasta-cook's stall [*il banco del macaronaro*] can be found together with the monk who lives at home [*il monaco di casa*], the handkerchief thief [*il ladruncolo di fazzoletti*], and the lousy family [*la famiglia di pidocchiosi*]. This pasta is sold by the plate, in two- or three-*soldi* portions, and the poor of Naples use abbreviations that refer to the price: "a 'two'" ["*nu doie*"] and "a 'three'" ["*nu tre*"]. The

portions are small, and the customer bickers with the tavern-keeper, because he wants a little more sauce, a little more cheese and a little more pasta.

A piece of octopus, boiled in seawater and seasoned with very hot chilies, can be bought for two *soldi*, a business that is handled in the street by women using a small fire and a little cooking-pot. For the same price, one can purchase *maruzze*, that is to say, snails in broth, together with a biscuit soaked in the broth. From a large frying pan the tavern-keeper will, for two *soldi*, scoop up a big spoonful of a mixture of scraps of pork fat and bits of sweetmeats, along with onions and little chunks of cuttlefish, and pour it onto the customer's bread, being very careful not to let any of the hot dark grease spill onto the ground; it all must flow onto the soft inner part of the bread, because the customer wants it that way.

As soon as they have three *soldi* per day for their meal, the poor of Naples— consumed with nostalgia for family life—no longer go to the tavern-keeper to buy pre-cooked foods. They eat at home instead, either sitting on the floor, on the threshold of their ground floor dwelling, or on some collapsing old chair.<sup>iv</sup>

With four *soldi* Neapolitans make a big salad composed of greenish raw tomatoes and onions, or a salad with cooked potatoes and beets, or a salad with broccoli rabe, or a salad with fresh cucumbers.<sup>v</sup>

Well-to-do people, who can spend eight *soldi* per day, eat great bowls of vegetable soup, which may contain endive, cabbage leaves, chicory, or all of these together; the latter is the so-called *minestra maritata*, blending harmoniously the different flavors of its ingredients.<sup>vi</sup> Or, in the right season, these people may eat a soup made of yellow pumpkin with lots of pepper, or a soup made of green beans flavored with tomatoes, or a soup made of potatoes cooked in tomato.

However, for the most part, those who can afford it will buy a *rotolo*, or roll, made from blackish pasta of all shapes and sizes—whatever is left over at the bottom of pasta boxes—that have been mixed together haphazardly. This is in fact called *monnezzaglia*, or trash; and it is flavored with tomatoes and cheese.

The poor of Naples love to eat fruit, but never spend more than one *soldo* on it at a time. In Naples, one *soldo* is the price of six small and slightly worm-eaten pears, but that doesn't matter. For the same price are sold a half-kilo of figs, a bit overripe from the sun; or ten to twelve of those small yellow plums that seem to look feverish; or a cluster of black grapes; or a small, bruised and somewhat soggy yellow melon; for one *soldo* the vendor of watermelons sells two slices of a melon that didn't turn out quite right and is whitish in color.

Another treat of which the poor of Naples are fond is *spassatiempo* or, that is to say, the oven-roasted seeds of various melons, along with fava beans and chickpeas; one *soldo* supplies enough to nibble on for half a day, stinging the tongue and swelling the stomach as if one had eaten a meal.

Their supreme indulgence is *soffritto*, which consists of scraps of pork cooked with oil, tomato paste and preserve of sweet red pepper, together forming a red heap that captivates the eye, and from which slices are cut for five *soldi* each. It's like dynamite in your mouth.

## Questionnaire

Roast meat? – The poor of Naples never eat any.

Stewed meat? – Sometimes on Sundays or major holidays; but it's either pork or lamb.

Meat broth? – It is quite unknown to the poor of Naples.

Wine? – Sometimes on Sundays: either the wine they call *asprino*, which costs four *soldi* per liter, or the one known as *maraniello*, which costs five *soldi* per liter: the latter dyes the tablecloth light blue.

Water! – Always: and it's bad.<sup>vi</sup>

## Streetside altars

Do you wonder at the open-air altars and shrines in the streets of the old city center? Are you scandalized by its little processions of disheveled, barefoot women chanting and carrying an image of the Holy Virgin? The poor of Naples—unfortunate folk who have lived so badly and yet so good-naturedly, and who die in such a miserable way with such resignation!—are superstitious, and their superstitions have made a painful impression upon us all. Did you think that superstition was a thing of the past? How could you have done so? Do you no longer remember anything at all? Processions and public prayers took place during the 1865 cholera epidemic; during the 1867 postwar cholera outbreak, which was more terrible and more harrowing, images of the Virgin Mary and of patron saints were brought out of all the parish churches; the processions met in the streets and merged together: it was at once a medieval and Southern mystery. In our day King Umberto has seen them, just as the great King Victor Emmanuel saw them seventeen years ago. During the terrifying 1872 eruption of Vesuvius, a lava flow threatened Naples for three consecutive days. The common women of the city center went to the Cathedral to take out the head of Saint Januarius, which they wanted to carry through the streets in order to stop the lava.<sup>viii</sup> For a moment, the nobles who are the keepers of the relics, together with the canon priests of the Cathedral, almost gave it to them. On the fourth day the sun did not come out, a dense cloud of ash covered Naples, and it began to rain ash like at Pompeii; in every quarter the women formed processions, weeping and crying aloud in the gloom and darkness. During the 1873 cholera outbreak, which was rather milder yet still very intense, in each of the four poor quarters of the old city center there was a procession carrying the respective images of: Our Lady of Perpetual Help from the church of the same name in the Banchi Nuovi neighborhood; Our Lady from the church of Our Lady of Portosalvo in the Porto quarter; and Christ at the Column from the church in the narrow Vicolo dell'Università. O what fleeting memory we all have!

And daily life? Just by looking around, and observing what takes place, even superficially, no one could delude himself into thinking that the religious fervor of the poor in Naples has come to an end. These small outdoor altars, with a pair of candles in front of them, can be found at the corner of every street in the old quarters of the city on certain feast-days and holidays. It's true that these are made by children: but their mothers keep an eye on the work, and their big sisters—at once

laughing and praying a little bit—ask passers-by for a donation. For the more important holidays, the poor put aside money for a year in order to pay for small lamps in the style of Ottino<sup>38</sup> and multicolored festoons, and each alley seeks to outdo the other: there are fights and knifings on account of these rivalries. This lighting is picturesque and gives artists fits of ecstasy, although such notorious egotists as these are merely immersed in contemplation of their own Buddha, namely art. Moreover, whenever a woman recovers from a serious illness, she gives thanks to God by observing the vow that she made to go door-to-door through the entire neighborhood to beg alms. Up and down she goes, on unsteady legs, her face dull, being turned down flat with doors slammed in her face. No matter: she must endure it all, because such was her vow. All the alms that she manages to collect are given to the Church. When a little boy is sick, his parents dedicate the child to Saint Francis: when he recovers, they dress him like a miniature monk with a home-made cassock, a cord around his waist, sandals on his bare feet, and a tonsure. Who hasn't come across such figures in the poor quarters of Naples?

Are you really so astonished by the miracle of Saint Januarius? Old women, who live in the Molo neighborhood and claim to be his descendants, take over the high altar of the Cathedral on holy days devoted to this saint and let no one else approach it. They loudly chant the *Credo* while waiting for the [blood] miracle to occur, and every time they start over again they raise their voices louder and louder, until they're shouting and flailing around as if possessed, all the while hurling insults at the saint himself, such as “nasty old-timer,” “cheeky oldster,” “green face”: do you find this shocking? Saint Anne's foot is placed on the belly of women who are giving birth or who cannot conceive a child; in the church of Santa Maria la Nova, the oil burning in the lamp lit before the corpse of St James of the Marches [San Giacomo della Marca] cures headaches; the crucifix in the church of Mount Carmel has been seen to bleed from its wounds; in the Mercanti quarter, Saint Peter's staff is venerated in the underground church of Saint Aspren (who was Naples' first bishop); the holy water in the church of Saint Blaise on the Booksellers' Street [San Biagio ai Librai] cures sore throats; bread-rolls blessed in the church of Saint Nicholas of Bari, known as *panelle*, if thrown into the air during a thunderstorm, will protect one from lightning-strikes. Among the holy relics in Naples are hundreds of small bones, scraps of veils or clothing, and fragments of wood. Every woman in Naples has a sachet containing such relics, as well as

printed pages with prayers, hanging around her neck or on her belt, or kept beneath her pillow. This same little bag is attached to the swaddling-clothes of newborns.

Do you think that Our Lady of Mount Carmel is enough for the people of Naples? I have counted two hundred fifty different names for the Virgin Mary, and by no mean are those all of them. Principal among these names, however, are four or five. When a woman of Naples is ill or is in grave danger, one of her female relatives makes a vow to one of these Madonnas. Afterward she carries out the vow, wearing a dress—a new outfit—that has been blessed in church and that cannot be taken off until it is worn out. For Our Lady of Sorrows the dress is black with white ribbons; for Our Lady of Mount Carmel it is lead-grey with white ribbons; for the Immaculate Conception, the dress is instead white with light blue ribbons; for Our Lady of La Sallette, it's white with pink ribbons. When there isn't enough money to make a dress, an apron is usually made instead; if the relative should fail to observe the vow, the members of her household expect misfortune to come their way.

And the sacred is mixed with the profane. In order to find a husband, one has to pray a novena at the church of St. John for nine consecutive evenings—at midnight, outside [on] a balcony—and these prayers must be made with certain special antiphons. If you have the courage to do this, then on the ninth evening you will see a bar of fire blaze across the sky with the accursed Salomé dancing atop it: immediately afterward, a voice will pronounce the name of your future husband. Saint Paschal is another protector of girls of marriageable age, and for nine straight evenings the following antiphony must be repeated to him: “O blessed Saint Paschal—send me a husband—handsome, red-haired, with a fine complexion—exactly like you—o blessed Saint Paschal!” Saint Pantaleon too protects girls, but in a different way: he provides them with the winning numbers for the lottery, so that they have a dowry and can marry. For nine evenings at midnight the girl must pray to him, alone in a room, with the balcony window open and the door open, and after the *Ave* and the *Pater* she must say this antiphony to him: “My Saint Pantaleon—by your chastity—and by my virginity—give me the numbers, please!” On the ninth evening steps can be heard; it's the saint coming to the girl; the knocking sounds that she hears are the saint giving her the numbers. On the fourth or fifth evening of these strange rituals the girls are in such a state that they hallucinate and

fall down in fits. Some of them claim to have seen and to have heard something on the ninth evening, but their faith was not great enough and the miracle did not take place.

All of the superstitions scattered throughout the world are brought together in Naples, where they are magnified and multiplied. Everyone in Naples believes in the *evil eye*. We're not talking about spilt oil, broken mirrors, spoons crossed with knives, petticoats worn inside-out that bring bad luck, so-called "marked" coins, spiders, scorpions and hens: who cares about these old superstitions?<sup>9</sup> Neapolitans still believe in the Sybils: one of these women, known as *Bright Star*, can be found in the place known as the *Hundred Streets*, toward Corso Vittorio Emmanuele; another very famous Sybil figure, locally known as *siè Grazie*, can be found in the *Vicolo Mezzocannone*; and there are many others of lesser renown. They are paid fifty cents, two lire, or five lire.

The people of Naples believe in *spirits*. The *monaciello* (little monk) haunts all homes in Naples: this little imp dresses in white when bringing good luck, or in red when bringing misfortune. Many people have told me that they've seen him with their own eyes. At Saint Teresa of the Discalced Carmelites [Santa Teresa degli Scalzi], where the road begins its rise toward Capodimonte, there's a lovely small *palazzo* that is never rented: I myself saw that it was closed for twenty years because *spirits* were known to live there. The people of Naples believe in the *spirits* who give out the numbers for the lottery, just as Neapolitans believe in the *assistito*, an individual "assisted" by the spirits. These *assistiti* are extremely odd persons, some of whom are in good faith while others are spongers: they eat little, drink water, talk in riddles, fast before going to bed, and experience visions. They live off of those who play the lottery, and they themselves never play. Sometimes disappointed gamblers will thrash an *assistito*, only to ask for forgiveness afterward. Monks too may have visions. There was a famous one in Marano, near Naples, to whom people went on pilgrimages. Another young monk, who also became famous, lived in the convent of Saint Martin [San Martino]. Sometimes those who play the lottery will kidnap a monk and beat and torture him in order to get the numbers. One of these fellows died from such treatment. Before he expired, however, he transmitted the numbers, which were those drawn subsequently in the weekly lottery. Half of Naples won the lottery that time, because a newspaper had published those same numbers before the drawing took place.

The poor of Naples—especially the women—believe in witchcraft. The spell or *fattura* has many convinced believers: witches, known as *fattucchiere*, abound. What if a wife wants her husband, who has to go far away, to remain faithful to her? The witch gives her a knotted piece of string, which the wife must sew into the lining of her husband's jacket. And if a woman wants to be loved by a certain man? The *fattuchiera* burns a lock of the woman's hair and makes a powder from it, adding other special ingredients: the indifferent man must then be made to drink it in his wine unknowingly. And what if you want to win a court case? In that case, you need to tie, morally speaking, the tongue of the lawyer representing the other party: you do this by tying a piece of string with fifteen knots and calling on the devil—a dreadful act of sorcery. Do you want an unfaithful lover to die? In that case, you need to fill a small pot with poisonous herbs and set it boiling in front of his door at midnight. What about if you want to kill a woman who is your rival? First you need to stick enough pins into a fresh lemon to form a little portrait of her; then, after attaching a shred of your rival's dress to the lemon, you must throw it into her well. The *fattura* reaches very broadly across Naples: there is a strange and sometimes vile literature on spells and prayers; there are different classifications of spells for timid or daring souls; the *fattura* is found in all neighborhoods in the city; these spells offers help for all sorts of life's necessities, whether sentimental or brutal, and for all kinds of desires, from the gentle to the bloody.

Well, that's all. Or rather, that's not all. You must multiply by twenty everything that I've said here: and perhaps you still won't have a true picture. Does it frighten you, this hotchpotch of faith and error, of mysticism and sensuality, this so very pagan and object-oriented cult, this idolatry? Do these things, which are worthy of savages, pain you? And who has done nothing for the consciousness of the poor of Naples? What teachings, what words, what examples have you thought to give to these people, who are so outgoing, so easy to win over, so naturally enthusiastic? In truth, they have been able to find—in the depths of poverty that are all they know in real life—no other comfort than in the illusions produced by their own imagination: and no other refuge than in God.

## The lottery

Well, some great dream must be granted to these exceptionally Southern people, for whom imagination is the greatest, most vital and inexhaustible power of the human soul. For in their blood meet and mingle the sweet, poetic, and passionate heritage of Etruscan, Arab, Saracen, Norman and Spaniard—so that this rich Neapolitan blood grows red-hot with hatred, burns with love, and consumes itself in dreams.

They are a humble and good-natured folk, who would be happy with little, but instead have nothing to make them happy. With sweetness and patience they endure poverty, daily hunger, the indifference of those who ought to love them, and the neglect of those who ought to comfort them.

They are happy to live in the open air, which is part of their Oriental heritage. Yet they have no air in which to live; they love the sunshine, but have none; they love bright colors, but live in dismal surroundings. With their memories of the Greek civilization that came before them, they love white arcades set against a sky-blue background; yet the lairs in which they live do not seem fit for human habitation. They have the worst of the fruits of the earth, the same as are fed to swine in the countryside; and there are foods that they never taste.

Every week the poor of Naples nevertheless renew their great dream of happiness. They live for six days with a growing, overwhelming sense of hope that becomes greater and greater, until it surpasses the limits of reality. For six days, the poor of Naples dream their great dream, which is about everything they do not have: a clean house with fresh and healthful air to breathe, a lovely shaft of warm sunshine on the floor, a high bed with clean white sheets, and a well-polished dresser. In this same dream, there are pasta and meat every day, along with a liter of wine, as well as a cradle for the baby, clean linen for the wife and a new hat for the husband.

All of these things, which reality cannot and never will give them, are possessed by them in their imagination between Sunday and the following Saturday. They talk about them and are sure of them; they make their plans, which become almost a reality for them, and over which husband and wife quarrel and make up.

There is deep disappointment and boundless grief at four o'clock on Saturday afternoon. On Sunday morning, however, their imaginations take heart and go back to work: the weekly dream starts over. The lottery, the lottery is the great dream that consoles the Neapolitan imagination. It is the obsession of those overheated minds; it is the great happy vision that appeases the oppressed; it is the immense hallucination that overcomes all souls.

This disease of the spirit is contagious; it is subtle, infallible and inevitable, and its power to spread is incalculable. The contagion of the lottery spreads from the doorman, who also works as a cobbler seated at his bench before the building entrance, to the poor seamstress bringing him old shoes to resole. From her it passes to her lover, who works as a busboy at a tavern. He spreads it to the innkeeper, who gives it to all of his customers, who in turn disseminate it throughout homes, workshops, other taverns, and even churches.

The maid on the fifth floor (right side) plays the lottery, hoping not to be a maid any longer. But all the servants on all the floors play too, whether the housemaid on the first floor who earns thirty lire a month or the domestic servant [*vajassa*] on the sixth floor, who makes eight lire a month and dreams of putting an end to her hard labor. They speak together about their numbers, crowding together on the landings and telling them to one another from the windows or telegraphing them with sign language. The fruit vendor down in the street, who stands there in the sunshine and the rain, plays the lottery, and, from her street corner on down, there are women who believe in the lottery and who play the lottery faithfully and passionately: the tailor's wife sewing in the doorway, the tinsmith's wife smothered in the stench of lead, the washerwoman whose hands are in soapsuds all day long, the chestnut-vendor who burns her face and hands with the steam and heat of her stove, and the walnut-vendor whose hands are blackened to the wrist by gallic acid.

They all play the lottery, even in the narrow room where eight or ten girls work as seamstresses. One of them gives out the numbers, a second girl has other numbers and the forewoman knows the true ones, while a seamstress' baby sleeps in a cradle and lard fries in a pan on the hearth.

The so-called *capere* or poor women's hairdressers—with their apron rolled up around their belt, and their unkempt hair and greasy hands—do hair for one *soldo* a day. They take the numbers around to their clients, and in turn get others from them: they are the great spokeswomen of the numbers. In every workplace in which Neapolitan workers gather to labor for such long hours at such wretched pay, the lottery puts down deep roots. In all of the schools for the poor, the schoolmistresses play the lottery, as do the older schoolgirls, who pool their lunch money and play as a group. Wherever those unfortunate women, of whom Naples has so many, gather to make a living from sin, the lottery represents one of the greatest hopes: the hope of redemption.

But do not think that this evil belongs only to the poor. No, no: it rises up and assaults the middle class; it works its way into all levels of the bourgeoisie and of business, and even into the aristocracy. The lottery takes possession and dominates, wherever there is a real need that is kept secret, wherever something has been thrown out of balance and cannot be fixed, wherever there is invisible but imminent financial ruin, wherever there is a desire that in every way seems impossible, wherever the hidden hardness of life makes itself most felt, and wherever the only remedy can be money.

All unmarried girls without a single *soldo* for their dowry secretly play the lottery. The many employees of the municipality, the banks, the revenue office and the excise-tax office all play the lottery. The same is true for all the pensioners who cannot live on their pensions and, having nothing to do, practice the Kabbalah or, in other words, study the black magic of the lottery; they play desperately, and always pawn their account passbooks.<sup>3</sup> All the sales personnel in the stores, who earn forty lire a month, know the *sure* numbers and play them every week. The magistrates give a great deal of their earnings to the lottery. They are paid only a pittance, but represent the greatest moral equity; although exposed to temptations, they reject these with an inflexibility worthy of a greater reward. Burdened by many offspring and ruined by transfers, their weakness and their hope consist of the lottery.

Shopkeepers, continually struggling with bills and caught in a daily fight against bankruptcy, end up clinging to this unreliable life preserver that is the lottery. Because of their gambling fever, stock-exchange speculators, who live on the razor's edge and are able to dance a waltz upon it, willingly taste the hope provided by the lottery. Because of what I have seen, heard, understood and intuited, I know of all these symptoms of the evil that rises up even to the ruling classes.

Aristocratic ladies play the lottery in part for fun, in part with the hope of a new bracelet, and in part because they are worried about a seamstress' bill that their husbands will never pay. Even the *postieri* or employees of the lottery offices, who ought to be immune to this evil because they are so well acquainted with it and find themselves always in the midst of it, cannot resist this temptation. Thus all those with the worst cases of lottery fever, who cannot wait any longer, make their way at four o'clock on Saturday afternoon to the Lottery headquarters, in a narrow street between the Via Pignatelli and the Via di Santa Chiara, to watch the drawing of the numbers.

All the serving-women, women vendors, male and female workers, girls and office employees cannot move from where they are. So a street urchin is sent out to the nearest lottery outlet to get the numbers while everyone waits. The least inhibited show themselves in the doorway or at the window, while the shier ones stay inside but keep their ears open. The boy returns running and out of breath; he stands at the head of the alley and shouts out the numbers with a theatrical flair:

—Twenty-four! [*Vintiquattro!*]

—Sixty-nine! [*Sissantanove!*]

—Forty-two! [*Quarantaroie!*]

—Eight! [*Otto!*]

—Seventy-five! [*Sittantacinche!*]

A universal silence: everyone turns pale.

But like all dreams that are too pronounced, the lottery leads to inaction and idleness. Like all visions, it leads to falsehoods and lies. Like all hallucinations, it leads to cruelty and ferocity. Like all sham remedies born from poverty, it produces poverty, degradation and crime.

The poor of Naples stay sober, and do not turn to hard drink; they do not die of alcoholism; they instead turn to, and die for, the lottery.

The lottery is the true intoxicant of Naples.

## More on the lottery

Rooted in an oral tradition, like certain fables and legends, the lottery has an elementary, rudimentary, illiterate form of writing. All Neapolitans who do not know how to read, such as old people, children and women (especially women), know by heart the *smorfia* or *Key to Dreams*, and promptly apply it to any dream or anything that occurs in real life. Did you dream of a dead man?<sup>2</sup>—47—but he was speaking—then 48—and weeping—65—which frightened you—90.<sup>iii</sup> A young man was stabbed by a woman?<sup>2</sup>—17, misfortune—18, blood—41, knife—90, the poor. If a pot falls from its hook, a child takes sick, a horse runs away, or a large rat appears: these call for numbers, right away.

Whether big or small, all events are considered to be a mysterious source of gain. A young girl dies of typhoid; her mother plays the numbers; when they are drawn, the woman exclaims: “She done me good even in dying!” [*M’ha fatte bbene pure murenne!*”]

A wife speaks of the love that her late husband had for her before he died. Then she adds, melancholically, that if his love for her had been truly great, he would have appeared to her in a dream in order to give her the numbers. And because he has forgotten to do so, he is an ingrate, for he knows that she is a poor woman and that he ought to help her.

Salvatore Daniele dismembers that Gazzarra woman: a lottery ticket. The poor say: “She’s dead, now she could at least feed those of us who are still alive” [*Chella è mmorta, mo, almeno ce refrescasse a nuie, che simmo vive*”]. Salvatore Misdea kills seven soldiers: a lottery ticket. The law kills Misdea: a lottery ticket. In the doorways, in the *bassi*, and on the street corners, committees and subcommittees decide on the numbers. The ticket is chosen; but the numbers are not drawn. They must have made a mistake; they should have used this number and that one, which were instead those drawn.

This science of the *smorfia* is so deeply engrained that, to call someone crazy, people say: “he’s a twenty-two” [*è nu vintiroie*”], since 22 means “crazy.” Because every insult has a number of its own, the jargon of the lottery can be used to deliver insults as one’s anger slowly mounts. A woman

punches another woman, smashing her face. The assailant tries to exculpate herself in front of the judge by saying: “she called me a ‘seventy-eight’ [*m’ha chiammata sittantotto*]”.<sup>xiii</sup> The judge has to consult a copy of the *smorfia* in order to see what is insulting about that number.

The Kabbalah exists more for the upper than the lower classes: but it does trickle down to the latter. To be sure, the poor do not purchase any of the many weekly papers about the Kabbalah, for which an annual subscription costs ten lire. Bearing strange titles like *The True Friend*, *The Treasure*, *The Lightning-Bolt*, and *The Horn of Plenty*, these are produced anonymously. The poor do not write to those “math professors” living at No. 12 Vico Nocelle, or No. 44 San Liborio, or No. 3 Vico Zuroli who advertise in the newspapers, promising success to anyone who pays for a subscription to their publications.<sup>xiv</sup> But something of these leaks out. A certain man knows what the numbers are; people wait for him in the street and put a couple of lire in his hand; he is satisfied by this little transaction.

*L’assistito* (an individual “assisted” by the spirits) is a cancer gnawing at the bourgeois families of Naples.<sup>xv</sup> This person is a pale convulsive who eats a lot, pretends to—or does—hallucinate, does not work, speaks in riddles, claims to suffer cruelly, and lives off of those who worship him. The reputation of the *assistito* reaches the poor from the bourgeois household by way of the maid, the manservant, and the laundress; and the *assistito* extends his acts of mysticism and fantasy to this sphere too, earning small and un hoped-for amounts while gaining followers. He ends up, when walking in the streets, always surrounded by four or five people who court his favor and study his every word.

The monk is the great helper and the providence of the poor; their faith and their unshakable belief in him is due to the fact that *the monk knows the numbers*. This is the dogma of the poor. If a monk does not give out the numbers, it is because the Lord has forbidden him to help sinners; if he gives them out, and they are not the ones drawn, it is because the player lacked true faith; if he gives them out, and they are drawn, the news spreads in a flash, and the poor monk is plagued by a dangerous popularity. He is like an artist who has created a masterpiece; woe to him who does not keep it up; he is lost. A monk who has only given out a winning double may hope to live in peace. But any monk who has given out three numbers, and all three have been drawn, had better

beware. For they will try to seduce him in every possible way: with gifts, with money, with offerings, with masses, and with alms; they will have children, women, and old grandmothers plead with him; they will wait for him in the street, at the entrance to the church, by the confessional, at the monastery door; they will take their case to his mother, his brother and his aunt; they will besiege him morning, noon and night; they will beat him up; they will kidnap and torture him; they will let him starve to death so that at least, with his dying breath, he will give them the numbers. Such things have happened. Often, in order to save himself, a monk will get his superior to transfer him to another town. When he vanishes, the poor say that the Virgin Mary took him away.

The poor of Naples play the lottery with as much money as they have. No matter how destitute they may be, on Saturday the poor always come up with six *soldi* or half a lira to play. They make recourse to every expedient; they put their imaginations to work, have a look around, and end up finding a way. The greatest misery consists in saying not that there was nothing to eat at mealtime, but rather that “I wasn’t able to play even one ticket” [*“nun m’aggio potuto jucà manco nu viglietto”*]. These words are enough to horrify anyone who hears them. Between Friday evening and Saturday morning, the streets are swarming with people who want to play but have no money. Workers ask for a day’s pay in advance; maids shamelessly steal from the grocery money; the number of beggars in the streets multiplies from Friday to Saturday; people sell whatever can still be sold, and pawn whatever can be pawned.

For the poor there are, first of all, the usual tickets to play: those that are always played because it is a tradition, because it is a must, or because no one can do without them, such as the famous double—six and twenty-two; the famous triple—five, twenty-eight and eighty-one; and the so-called Blessed Virgin’s triple—eight, thirteen and eighty-four. Fortunately for the government, these triples are drawn only about once every twenty years. Once, when the famous double—six and twenty-two—was drawn after many years’ wait, the government paid out two million lire in small winnings worth five or ten lire each. The streets of Naples were suddenly filled with *tavollette*, that is to say, everyone lunched or dined with their winnings before starting again, the following week, to play with even greater zeal.

And everyone has a special ticket that is played each week for years and years, with a faith that never wanes. A bootblack who played the same ticket for thirty years had inherited it from his dying father, together with his shoeshine kit: the double had been drawn three or four times in thirty years; but never the triple.

A doorman played the same ticket for forty-five years without ever winning anything. The first time that he accidentally forgot to play, the triple was drawn—and the doorman died of grief.

And there is always the ticket for exceptional events, whether a brawl or a suicide, a pistol shot or poison. Last but not least, there is the ticket based on the Kabbalah that was gotten out of the *assistito* or the monk.

These four tickets must be played, no matter what; on average they cost from fifty cents to two lire per week. When someone in Naples has only two *soldi* left, he or she instead plays the underground lottery, called *o' gioco piccolo*.

For the most part, it is women who work like procuresses for this great fraud. Filthy and dressed in rags, one of these women carries a register in a deep pocket underneath her petticoat. When the players—male or female—come to her, they put down two *soldi* and give her the numbers. In exchange, they are given a dirty scrap of paper on which the numbers are scribbled in pencil, along with a promise that never changes: one *scudo* for the double, and forty *scudi* for the triple.<sup>xvi</sup> The woman does the rounds of the neighborhood, where everyone knows her, knows what her work is, and is expecting her to come. Denounce her to the authorities? No one would dare to turn her in; for she is a benefactress.

There are big profits to be made, of course. All these two-*soldi* tickets add up to hundreds and hundreds of lire, and almost all the operators of the underground lottery grow wealthy.

Along the Riviera of Naples can be seen the elegant carriages of rich bourgeoisie whose fortunes were made with the underground lottery. Everyone knows who they are, but these individuals are not directly involved in it, because they work through agents. The poor have blind faith in those

who run the underground lottery. Yet often, if there are many winning tickets to pay out on Saturday afternoon, the operators suddenly vanish from view with all of the registers. No one collects any winnings, but what does it matter?

The next week another woman makes the rounds again and, as if fatally attracted to the *gioco piccolo*, people come to her once more. What joy—both for the players and for those who take their money—to cheat the government!

Every so often the police arrest four or five of these agents, or these panderers; they are convicted and sent to prison; they are fined. What of it? They serve their sentences, pay the fine, get out of jail and start over again, with even greater zeal. One individual has been convicted *five times* for involvement in the underground lottery; this person owns an entire building, and complains of being persecuted by the government, while calling these convictions “a misfortune” [*na disgrazia*]. It was useless for the government to lower the price of a lottery ticket to two *soldi*, for the same fraud has continued, more popular than ever, fed by this great mass hallucination.

Statistics now show that more household thefts are committed between Thursday and Saturday; more possessions are pawned on these same three days at the Monte di Pietà [state pawn shop]; the private pawnbrokers are extremely busy on these same three days; more brawls occur on these same three days, but especially on Saturday afternoon; the ugliest, foulest, most shameful and violent acts occur in this fatal period of the week. It is in these same three days that the poor of Naples deliver themselves to the moneylenders: and this is the deadly cancer that devours them.

## Usury

A poor woman needs five lire to pay her landlord, so she goes looking to borrow them from *donna Carmela*, who loans money *cu 'a credenza* (on faith). The poor woman hesitates for a long time before going there because she's afraid and ashamed, but in the end she makes up her mind to turn to *donna Carmela* since she cannot do otherwise. Most of the time, *donna Carmela*—who is big and fat—practices a high-end profession: she mends lace, she quilts the big cotton blankets used in Naples, and in winter she stitches gold thread onto velvet. Although this is formally her profession, which leaves her with a great deal of free time, her real profession is loaning money to poor people. *Donna Carmela* is chatty and outgoing in this first conversation with the poor woman: she tells the latter to take courage, and, if necessary, she expresses sympathy for her dilemma. Confessing that she too in the past has been in a tight spot financially, she sends the poor woman away after cheering her up and giving her the five lire—that is to say, four and a half lire. The loan is for one week, with an interest rate of two *soldi* per lira. Payment must be made in advance, and therefore fifty cents are taken out of the five-lire loan. A week passes but the poor woman doesn't have the five lire needed to pay off the loan. Red-faced with shame, she implores *donna Carmela* to settle for another week's worth of interest, namely fifty cents. The lender says nothing and pockets the ten *soldi*.<sup>vii</sup> Thus pass the next four, five, up to ten weeks, without the poor woman ever being able to pay back the original loan: and each Monday she has to pay ten percent interest for that week, and after the fifth week *donna Carmela* is wild with rage; the poor woman has to plead with her not to shout or to make a scene. The lender wants her money back, she wants “her blood” returned to her, the interest is of no use to her, she needs to have her capital.

The irate voice of *donna Carmela* can be heard every Saturday and every Monday at the threshold of the front doors of ground floor slum dwellings [*bassi*] or at the doorways of workshops: she starts her rounds in the morning to demand, *to collect*, making men and women tremble with her loud and imperious tone of voice. In one place there's one lira that she wants to collect, in another there are two lira and in yet another there are five: none dare to rebel against her because they

haven't the money to pay her back, and none dare to rebel against her because they might have need of her services again. That fat woman is implacable, and knows the power that she has: if a maidservant doesn't pay her back, *donna Carmela* threatens to cause a scandal with the servant's employer; if a woman doesn't pay her back, she threatens to tell the woman's husband; if a worker doesn't pay her back, she knows the address of his boss and will go there to denounce the debtor. She is at once astute and cautious, daring and foul-mouthed: she never abandons the role of benefactress, whose very fiber is being gnawed at, and whose blood is being drunk, by these ingrates. And in fact no one knifes her or beats her up or insults her, and even more strikingly, no one has the courage to refuse her the money: such is the honesty of the people of Naples that they are not even able to cheat a usurer. They don't even blame her for her outbursts, and they always try to calm her down.

When a poor woman of Naples needs an apron, a dress, a couple of shirts, or a kerchief for her neck, but lacks the money to purchase them, she makes up her mind to go and see *donna Raffaella* [*sic*], who provides *la robba cu 'a credenza* (personal effects on faith). At a low price, this usurer gets cotton cloth and percale and kerchiefs from stores and resells them to the poor. Naturally, every one of these items is resold for much more than its true value: this is the first profit that she takes. As with the other usurer, the poor must pay interest amounting to ten percent per week on the sale price. These debts, which continually grow more complex, weigh on the existence of poor women for months and months on end: so that very often the apron is worn out, the dress is torn, the shirts are full of holes, and the poor woman has paid already paid their value three times over, yet the debt owed to *donna Raffaella* is still the same. The usurer becomes enraged, howling as though possessed; she wants to tear the kerchief off the neck of the woman to whom she sold it, she wants to strip the apron off of the buyer's hips, and goes around shouting: "This is my stuff! You've stolen my blood from me!" Just as in the case of the other usurer, she ends up multiplying her money by a factor of four or five; just like the other usurer, she is necessary for the poor, who never react against these acts of violence; like the other, she only risks very small amounts of her capital, preferring to make many small business deals in which there is no risk to bigger ones that always include some danger.

The private pawn brokerages represent organized legal usury. These are not branches of the Monte di Pietà that must conform to the tariffs set by that great charitable institution; rather, they are legitimate authorized forms of speculation that depend upon their own capital resources. For the most part, these pawn brokerages are run by women that, for all of their vulgarity and ignorance, are deeply shrewd, and they are set up without much capital. First of all, any object is basely depreciated in value by them, especially if not made of gold: and the first profit is made in this way. An incredibly high registration fee must be paid, plus something more for the *administrative* fee, as well as one month's interest paid in advance. All of this is so complicated, so well safeguarded by the rules, so apparently legal, that these pawnbrokers charge five percent interest per month without anyone having the right to complain about it. I know of the wife of an office worker who in one of these pawn brokerages, run by a certain hefty *donna Gabriela*, had to pawn her only silk dress, which was her wedding dress that had originally cost two hundred fifty lire. The woman received thirty-six lire, of which she could take home only thirty-one because five lire had to be paid for interest plus administrative and registration fees. Fearful that her dress might be sold but not having the thirty-six lire needed to pay back the loan, for six months she had to pay five lire every month, which means that the pawnbroker got her money back. On the seventh month, however, the woman did not have even the five-lire payment, and the dress was sold. Since the dress was new, she hurried there to see what a high price must have been gotten for it: but, at least according to the register, the dress had instead been *gotten rid of* for thirty lire. She later had the pleasure of running into *donna Gabriela* at the theater wearing the woman's wedding dress, along with a great deal of gold and other jewelry that had been bought back at the pawn brokerage. Many of these ladies like to wear a profusion of objects that are on deposit with their pawn brokerage: more than one lower-class woman has seen her *pawnbroker* out for a stroll while wearing the same slender gold necklace that the woman had to pawn, as well as her neighbor's earrings and a velvet wrap belonging to another woman who lives on the third floor of the same apartment building. When the *pawnbroker* passes by, behind closed doors and windows sighs are stifled, tears are choked back, and faces suddenly grow pale: the *pawnbroker* seems like an Indian idol to whom gold and blood are sacrificed. Some *pawnbrokers*, who are more cunning and calculating, take objects made of gold and other high-value items and pawn them again, but this time at the Bank. In this way they make even more of a profit, because the Bank honestly offers

one third of the value of the object while the brokers don't even give one fifth: thus they increase their capital, and at the same time store these objects in a secure place.

But why—one may ask—do the poor not turn to the two Banks that operate pawn agencies in Naples, namely the Bank of the Holy Spirit and the Bank of Naples' *Banco dei pegni* in Palazzo Donnaregina? Why do they instead let themselves be exploited by these private pawn brokerages? The fact is that very lengthy bureaucratic processes are required at these government-regulated Banks—and many people either lack the patience or don't know what steps to take, or want to get it taken care of quickly, or have extremely pressing needs and prefer to enter into one of the first pawn brokerages that they come across, where their business will be done right away, without formalities or lots of talk. There is always a great deal of publicity surrounding these government-regulated Banks, and a timid person blushes with shame and prefers instead to slip into the discreet half-light of the private pawn brokerages, in which everything seems to be done with great secrecy. It's also the case that on Fridays and Saturdays, when the poor of Naples must play—and have played—the lottery, the crowds are so large that these two Banks alone are not enough, and so those members of the populace seeking to pawn their goods spill over into the private brokerages.

Let's see how all of this adds up now. Every alley has its own *donna Carmela*, every street has its own *donna Raffaella*, every corner of every square has its own authorized pawn brokerage; and in certain very dark streets, people may pawn their goods in one out of every three shops. We need to multiply these calculations of ours by a factor that reflects the entire city, we need to think of the poverty as well as the lottery: on one hand, greed and cunning; on the other hand, honesty and naïveté, dire need and want. The people of Naples are dying from this cancer—usury—in a state of misery without end.

## The picturesque

If you're a light sleeper, in the morning you will hear, among the many sounds of Naples, a rhythmic ringing of bells that periodically stops, only to begin again after a brief interval: together with it, there can be heard doors opening and closing, and windows and balconies opening, along with voices speaking, sometimes discussing loudly, from the street or the windows. The cows are coming around the city for a couple of hours. Each of them is led on a rope by a filthy cowherd: the servant women buy two *soldi* worth of milk, lingering at the threshold of the doorway and arguing about the amount; in order not to have to bother with the stairs, many of them lower from a window a bread-basket on a line with an empty glass and one *soldo* in it, and from up there they protest that there isn't enough milk in the glass, that the cowherd is a thief, and then they pull the basket back up with great care in order not to spill the milk; finally, they angrily slam the windows shut again.

These cows stop in front of every door while doing their morning rounds. If the servant women are still asleep, the cowherd shouts loudly: "*Lower the basket*"; if they don't hear him, he forcefully rings a cowbell. This is a picturesque morning tableau: those cows all covered in mud, the cowherd whose hands—black with filth—dirty the glass, those disheveled and half-dressed maidservants, those neighborhood women wearing camisoles with tomato stains.

The other half of the picture is in the afternoon, from four to six, when there comes a loud long ringing of many little bells: these are herds of goats that roam through all the streets of the city, each one led by a goatherd with his stick.

In front of the entry to every residential building the herd comes to a halt and lies down to rest on the ground, while the goatherd grabs a goat and drags it through the front door, in order to milk it in front of the maidservant, who has come downstairs: sometimes the mistress of the house doesn't trust in the honesty of either the goatherd or the servant; in that case, both the goatherd and the goat climb up as far as the third floor, and on the landing a family council forms in order to oversee the milking.

The goatherd and his goat go back downstairs at a gallop, sometimes running head-on into an unfortunate resident coming up the stairs without expecting such an encounter: down in the street outside the doorway a struggle ensues between the goatherd and his goats to get them moving again, until the latter start off running wildly, especially if evening is approaching and they know that they are going back to the hills.

In all civilized cities, you will not see these herds of animals—useful but dirty and smelly, including the cows—in the street: milk is sold in clean shops with white marble surfaces.

Not so in Naples: the custom is too picturesque to be abolished. No municipal government would dare to do so. In twenty-five years, the biggest reform that has been passed regards pigs, which can no longer be driven through the streets, as was previously allowed.

Another very picturesque thing is the take-over of the streets by small shopkeepers or itinerant salespersons. What pictures done in bright, lively and iridescent colors—what a big and beautiful feast for the eyes—what a powerful and sensual description—could these inspire in one of our modern experimental artists, who are overly concerned with setting! On Via Roma, which is the most important street in the city, the stretch between Saint Nicholas the Charitable [San Nicola alla Carità] and the street known as the Vico Chianche della Carità,<sup>xviii</sup> which is to say between two squares and two long sidewalks, starting at eight o'clock in the morning is taken over by sellers of fruits, greens, and pulses: figs and fava beans, grapes and chicory, tomatoes and sweet peppers clash with each other, while the sellers are constantly tossing or spraying water, or throwing away their wares that have gotten soaked: after eight o'clock in the morning, that stretch of the street is a battlefield filled with stinking water, peels, cabbage leaves, rotten fruit, and squashed tomatoes, so much so that—like the fatal hand of Lady Macbeth—not all the water in the ocean could possibly cleanse that stretch of Via Roma; despite all the efforts of the street-sweepers, it never manages to get truly cleaned up.

In the meantime the large Monteoliveto market nearby remains half-empty, with all the melancholy of big useless buildings; the Saint Paschal in Chiaia [San Pasquale a Chiaia] market has

now in fact been shut down; vendors in Naples do not want to go there, they want to sell in the streets instead.

The entire Pignasecca quarter, from Largo della Carità to the Fan-makers Street [Via Ventaglieri] by way of Montesanto, is clogged by a nonstop market. There are shops, but everything is sold in the street. The sidewalks there have vanished: has anyone ever seen them? Pasta, greens, colonial products,<sup>xv</sup> fruit, salamis and cheeses: absolutely all of it is in the street, whether it's sunny, cloudy or raining; the boxes, the scales, the showcases are all in the street; a famous deep-fryer turns out fried foods there; it's where melons are sold, for there's a melon-seller renowned for *crying his wares*; donkeys loaded with fruit come and go; indeed, the donkey is the quiet and powerful lord of Pignasecca.

Here the experimental novel could also apply its traditional symphony of scents, since inconceivable kinds of such “music” are in the air: frying oil, rancid salami, pungent cheese, pepper ground up in mortars, strong-smelling vinegar, dried cod soaking in water. In the midst of Pignasecca's symphony there is a grand and deep *motif* that is disconcerting: fish—especially tuna—is sold there under the full sun on sloping stall countertops made of marble. In the morning the tuna is sold for twenty-six *soldi* and the fishmonger shouts out the price with pride: but as evening comes the price drops to twenty-four *soldi*, and then to one lira, and then to eighteen *soldi*, for the decline of the day and the merchandise; when the price sinks to twelve *soldi*, the great and well-known symphony of stench has reached its climax.

Pignasecca can never be cleared and cleaned up; no municipal government has ever dared to declare it to be a public thoroughfare.<sup>xv</sup> The Christ's Blood [Sangue di Cristo] neighborhood, or rather (as it is called in Neapolitan) *the hens' blood* neighborhood, out of respect for the name of the Redeemer, could care less about the municipal government.

Besides, all of this is extremely beautiful for painters and writers.

There is nothing more picturesque than the street of Santa Lucia belonging exclusively to the local gentlemen fishermen, sailors, fish-trap weavers and oyster-mongers, as well as to their lady wives,

who sell sulfurous water and fried dough rings, cook octopus and deep-fry sweet peppers, not to mention to the indeterminate number of young masters and misses, all naked and bronze-colored, who are their offspring.

In that same street, everything is done in the open air: laundry, tomato preserves, doing ladies' hair and grooming cats, cooking meals and flirting, various games of chance. The street of Santa Lucia belongs to the *luciani*, as the local residents are known, who do there whatever suits them. The four blind alleys that rise from seaside Santa Lucia toward the hill behind it are, for their sheer filth, worthy rivals of the notorious *fondaci*—crumbling, fetid slum housing—in the Mercato quarter of the old city: overbridges link together the teetering, gutted dwellings, lines run from one balcony to the next, a flickering taper in front of a small and blackened outdoor image of the Virgin alone lights the alley, into which all the filth of those folks ends up.

Down by the seaside there are no longer any sidewalks: the *luciani* have taken over all of them for their fish-traps and flasks of sulfurous water. In the summer they even sleep on the sidewalk or the curb, and grumble at anyone who dares to pass that way and wakes them up. No one approaches their houses: in jest corncobs and fig-peels fly through the air, and the wine-cellars set out long tables in the street for their drinking customers.

The *luciani* tolerate the fact that the *tram* passes down their street, but they regularly curse it with gusto, for it represents an usurpation of that same street: the vendors of sulfurous water look like men dressed as women, with high-heeled wooden clogs, a short skirt tied at the front of the waist, and rosettes of pearls held up by a black thread tied around their ears so that the lobe doesn't rip from the weight. They are naturally quarrelsome and brutal: they practically compel you to drink the water that they're selling, they argue among themselves ceaselessly, stealing customers from each other. These people are indomitable: only another *luciano*, who can swear and cuss at them, could ever serve as their neighborhood delegate in the municipal government.

Once two of these vendors thrashed a city constable senseless because he wanted to write them out a fine: however, it's also true that the next day they raised money among themselves to help his old mother while her son was in the hospital.

But Santa Lucia, which is picturesqueness itself, is today still beyond the reach of building and sanitation codes: it's a fortified town.

Perhaps the cholera epidemic didn't kill many people in Santa Lucia: there is the sea, and there is sunshine. But what a black and greasy sea! And what rot and decay are bathed by that sunlight!

For painters who love local color, it is picturesque to see a cart set up as a food stall going round, in the evening, on the Via Roma. One can see little castles made of peeled prickly pears on small plates: a man pushes the cart, the air fills with smoke from an oil lamp, and every so often the cart comes to a stop. Then off it goes again, sometimes leaving in its wake slippery peels with sharp spines in them.

For writers it is rather picturesque to go around after midnight and to find men sleeping under the portico of the church of Saint Francis of Paola [San Francesco di Paola] with their heads resting on the bases of the columns, while other men sleep on benches in the public gardens in Piazza Municipio, and there are little boys and girls sleeping on the stairs of the churches of Saint Ferdinand [San Ferdinando], Saint Brigid [Santa Brigida], and Our Lady of Graces [La Madonna delle Grazie]—especially the latter, which has a wide stairway and certain broad little terraces, in the center of Via Roma.

Just a few steps from the Via Roma stands the cloister of the church of Saint Thomas Aquinas [San Tommaso d'Aquino], and this place may attract both artists and writers, although there are no more monks there. For it has become a small-scale slum dwelling or *fondaco*, a beggars' Court of Miracles, with its shops and trash-filled interior courtyards [*vanelle*] swarming with shadows, and its homes swarming with impoverished and wretched people.

But in reality it is very, very cruel that all of this should still exist, that human beings should have to endure such conditions, and that good-hearted men should tolerate that this be so.

## Charity

When in Naples a woman of the people has no children of her own, she does not suffer in secret because of her barrenness; she does not try some wonder cure, as newly-married aristocratic ladies do; she does not take for a pet a puppy or kitten or parrot, as young middle-class wives do. One Sunday morning she and her husband head to the foundling hospital, called the Annunziata (which stands next to the church of that same name), where she will choose a child among the little girls and boys there, some of whom have just been weaned, while others are not so small any longer. Having taken a liking to one of them in particular, she signs a declaration for the director of the charitable institution, and triumphantly returns home with a *son or daughter of the Virgin Mary*.

This little one is not hers, but the woman loves the child as if she herself had brought it into the world. She suffers to see the child suffer from illness or poverty, as if it were her own flesh and blood; in the world of Neapolitan childhood, it is certain that legitimate children are more likely to be beaten by their parents; everyone hesitates to beat a *daughter of the Virgin Mary*; a sense of deeply gentle mercy makes an adoptive mother explain: "*Poor thing, I haven't got the heart to beat her, she's a daughter of the Virgin Mary.*" If her little one flourishes, growing in health and beauty, her mother is as proud as if the child were her own handiwork; she tries to send the girl to school or at least to a seamstress to learn to sew, since doubtless the girl's beauty means that she is really the daughter of a prince. No matter what poverty or infirmity may do to her, in no case will the adoptive mother return the child—as she is entitled to do—to the foundling hospital. Their reciprocal affection is deep, as if it were truly filial; and at a certain age the memory of the Annunziata vanishes, and this "mother" acquires a daughter that is truly hers.

But there's more: let's take the case of a mother with five children. The smallest one falls gravely ill, and the mother makes a vow to the Virgin so that her son will recover: she will adopt a little foundling girl. The boy dies anyway, but his pious mother—a black kerchief tied around her neck, the only mourning that she can afford to wear—with tears in her eyes fulfills her vow. Thus as time passes the lovely living little one consoles the mother for her dead child, and she is left with only sweet memories and profound gratitude for the *daughter of the Virgin Mary*.

Sometimes the little boy does recover: on the first day in which he can go out again, his mother carries him in her arms to the church of the Annunziata and makes him kiss the altar, after which they go into the foundling hospital next door to choose his new little sister. Although she grows up with five or six legitimate children in the family, the foundling girl-child never feels like an intruder, no one ever threatens to throw her out, she eats whatever the others eat, she works just as the others work, her brothers watch over her to make sure that she doesn't fall in love with some dissolute fellow, when she gets married she weeps bitterly when she has to leave home, and she always comes back there as a place of refuge and comfort for her.

A frequent case of charity is this: too weak or worn out by work, a mother gives birth to a baby boy but has no milk for him. There is always a friend or neighbor, or some merciful stranger, who offers her own milk. Although this woman will now nurse two infants—what of it?—the Lord will see to it that she has enough milk for them both. Three times a day the birth mother whose breasts have gone dry brings her baby to the home of the fortunate mother: and sitting at the threshold she watches melancholically as her son sucks life into his body. One has to have witnessed such a scene, and to have heard the quiet, humble and grateful tone of voice with which she says, as she takes the child back into her own arms: “*May the Lord repay you with the same charity that you show to this child.*” And the nursing mother ends up feeling love for this second baby, and when he's weaned she suffers from not seeing him any more; and every so often she goes to visit him, bringing him a *soldo's* worth of fruit or an amulet of the Virgin Mary; the little boy has two mothers.

I have also seen this: a poor woman started working as a domestic servant, and could not keep her baby with her; she left him with another poor woman who worked at home—that is to say, in the street—trimming ladies' ankle boots. The latter put the two babies, both her own and her friend's, in the same wicker crib [*sportone*], attached one end of a little cord to the top edge of the crib and the other to her foot, and as she trimmed the ankle boots she sang a lullaby to the two babies; and as she worked, she moved her foot back and forth, rocking the two babies in the same crib.

The friend of another woman who was working as a domestic servant used to care for the latter's baby, but would have to bring him from very far away—sweating under the hot sun with the heavy infant in her arms—so that his mother could nurse him. The interview that took place on the landing or in the kitchen would go something like this:

—*“Has he been nice and quiet, at least?”*

—*“Yes he has, but he's always hungry.”*

—*“That's my little darling!”*

When the baby was done nursing, the woman's friend would take him back in her arms and say to him:

—*“Let's go home now, auntie's little darling; say good-bye to your mama.”*

And away the little boy would go quietly, without protesting, while his mother took a last look at her son from the kitchen window.

It's natural that the poor cannot offer alms, in the form of money, to those who are even poorer than they are, because they haven't got any money to give. But one can see or hear of the most exquisite, kindest acts of charity.

There was a cook who, whenever the lady of the house told her to make broth for lunch, always fell into a funk; she was only happy when told to make big nourishing dishes such as pasta or pulses or risotto. The cook was long suspected of gluttony, even though her badly worn little body had more need of broth than pasta. In truth, she was giving her own lunch every day to the doorkeeper's two little children, and she preferred to give them a substantive dish rather than three small spoonfuls of broth: in any case, the cook herself ended up with nothing to eat.

When in the evening they leave their place of service, all servant women carry off a little bundle containing leftovers from lunch—that is, whenever the lady of the house is good enough to let her domestics have them. These are not destined for the servants themselves, but for a little brother or a nephew or an old mother or some other poor woman who has nothing else.

No servant woman ever eats everything that is given to her: three quarters, one half, or sometimes all of it is destined for another person.

The sick in hospital, like people in prison, always find a sister, an aunt, a godmother, a friend or a lover who will deprive themselves for a week in order to buy, on Thursday or Sunday, four oranges to alleviate an invalid's thirst; or who will at night, in great haste, wash a prisoner's shirt in order to bring it back to him the next day all clean and ironed.

One must go to see what takes place at the gates of hospitals on visiting days: what a crowd of pale and anxious women gather there! I once saw a wife, whose husband had died in the hospital, go in a single day to the hospital director, to as many doctors whose addresses she could obtain as possible, to the mother superior as well as to the nuns themselves, and to the hospital staff, crying and pleading, tearing at her hair and imploring them in the name of Christ not to cut open her husband's corpse. She could accept the idea of his death, but the thought of an autopsy drove her to distraction.

No woman, whenever she eats in the street and sees a child stopping to watch her, will fail to give him right away some of what she is eating; and if she has nothing else, she'll give him bread. As soon as a pregnant woman stops on the street, everyone who happens to be eating, or selling something to eat, offers her some food without her having shown any desire for it; indeed, they compel her to take it, because they don't want to have any *doubts* later on about whether or not they did the right thing.

And the poor of Naples help, as best they can, those who beg in the streets: someone will give them a piece of bread, someone else will give them two or three tomatoes, someone else will offer an onion, or a bit of oil, or two figs, or a scoop of burning charcoal. In order to help the needy in this way, one woman used to let a beggar-woman come and cook over her own fire, burning on a small tuff hearth, whatever little bit of food the beggar had managed to collect for herself.

Whatever fire was left after the woman finished cooking would have gone to waste; it was better to use it to help out a destitute beggar.

Another woman was more ingenious in her alms-giving: since she herself was already poor, she ate pasta cooked in water and seasoned with only a bit of sharp cheese, but a woman who was her neighbor, and extremely poor, had only some crusts of dry, hard bread.

So the woman who was less poor used to give her neighbor the water in which she had cooked her pasta, a whitish-looking liquid that the latter would pour over those crusts of bread, softening them so that *at least they tasted something like pasta*.

A young woman who sewed for a living had to go to the Gesù e Maria hospital because she had fallen ill with pneumonia; when she recovered she left the hospital, although she was pallid, exhausted and greatly weakened. Yet the hospital, in order to help her in the face of what would likely turn out to be a case of consumption, provided her every morning with a good-sized dose of cod liver oil, which she was supposed to come up to the hospital to get. She showed up every morning with her glass until she was completely restored to health, at which point the hospital dispensary told her that she would no longer be given this remedy. The young woman grew confused and pale; she wept and pleaded with the nun not to suspend the treatment. It finally came out that the patient never took a drop of the oil for herself, but gave it away as charity to a poor woman who out of poverty was using it—once her natural disgust for the taste had been overcome—as a condiment for bread or to fry a *soldo's* worth of sweet peppers.

And yet another such story comes to my mind. One day in Largetto Consiglio a pregnant woman was overcome with birth pangs, lay down on the stairs and gave birth in the street. There was a great commotion: she herself kept quiet, but many other women around her were shrieking and crying out of commiseration and sheer emotion. And shortly there began to arrive—from all of the nearby *bassi*, shops and humblest dwellings—camisoles and swaddling in which to wrap the poor little one, along with bedsheets for the new mother. One mother offered a crib that had held her own dead baby; another mother baptized the infant, tracing the sign of the cross on his little face; a third went begging to all of the nearby homes; a fourth—who was a maid—volunteered her services and left to take the new mother's place at work. The baker's wife shared her bed with the new mother: and the baker slept on top of a table for ten days, using a sack for a pillow. And that poor unfortunate thing wept with emotion every time that she kissed her newborn son.

## Farewell

Here ends this brief study of truth and suffering. It is too small to hold the whole truth of Naples' poverty: too small, if I may be allowed to say so, to contain the modest, deep love of my Neapolitan heart. It is the unfinished work of a reporter, not of a writer; it is a cry that came from my soul; may it serve as a reminder and as a plea. May it serve to plead with those who can, and to remind those who should: do not abandon Naples, now that the cholera outbreak is over.

Do not abandon Naples again, when you are caught up in politics or business; do not leave this place—which we all must love—once more to its death throes. Of all the beautiful and good cities of Italy, Naples is the most graciously beautiful and the most profoundly good. Do not leave Naples in poverty, filth, and ignorance, without work and without help: do not destroy, in her, the poetry of Italy.

Rome, Autumn 1884

### Translator's note

Any translator of these texts must, first of all, contend with Serao's use of the slippery term *il popolo*. Although it may of course be used to indicate "(the) people" or "(the) populace," in the context of *Il ventre di Napoli* that would be far too general. Whenever Serao employs the term here, she is instead referring—with a constant concern for the effects on the South of the new liberal Italy's capitalist economic system—to all those Neapolitans who were not members of the privileged middle or upper classes. The mass of the city's population in the late nineteenth century was comprised of the working poor, the underemployed and the unemployed, including the desperately impoverished and disenfranchised, not a few of whom were still living like the *lazzari* of the early modern era, and who were the principal victims of the cholera epidemic. Among the slum-dwellers there were also, however, a great many artisans, clerks, workmen, domestic servants, day laborers, and the like, who toiled long hours to eke out a precarious living on the margins of the urban economy. Serao in fact devotes a considerable amount of *Il ventre di Napoli* to a searing portrayal of the difficult conditions of existence of the working poor. I have therefore rendered "il popolo napoletano" throughout as "the poor of Naples," unless the context clearly indicates otherwise.

Dialect words are frequently incorporated into these texts, but rarely translated directly into Italian by the author. These Neapolitan words were instead originally set in italics by Serao or by her publisher, in order to indicate through graphic signs the difference between modern Italian and the language of Naples. Often the sentence immediately preceding or following the appearance of dialect words is sufficiently periphrastic, or provides enough contextual information, to allow the reader to grasp their meaning. The Neapolitan language had a long and distinctive literary and theatrical tradition of its own, but by the 1870s it was increasingly being supplanted by the "new" national idiom. I have usually chosen to include the original dialect words in the translation, in order to signal to the reader that Serao is stepping beyond the bounds of modern Italian, and I provide an English-language equivalent wherever necessary.

The same could be said of certain local foods, which constitute a rock upon which many translators have foundered. For instance, "pizza" and "mozzarella" are linguistic borrowings that have become part of the English language, although the former was largely unfamiliar to Italians living outside of the South until after World War II. There is no need to set these in italics in the translations published here. To translate *'a spiritosa* or *'a scapece* into English, however, would necessarily involve the inclusion of a rather lengthy gloss. Fortunately, Serao herself often provides such a gloss for her contemporary Italian readers, many of whom would have been perhaps as mystified by some of these terms as English-language readers may be today. Here is an example of this tactic of hers in *Il ventre di Napoli*: "Another treat of which the poor of Naples are fond is *spassatiempo* or, that is to say, the oven-roasted seeds of various melons, along with fava beans and chickpeas." As elsewhere (see above), I provide the English-language reader with the original dialect word or words within the translation.

Terms for different kinds of money offer another notoriously difficult crux for the translator of texts from earlier eras. In this case, the difficulty of translating the 1884 version of *Il ventre di Napoli* is compounded by the recent superimposition of a new Italian national monetary system, based on the lira, in the wake of Unification. Coinage from the Bourbon era was supposed to be withdrawn from circulation, but in Naples—with its largely illiterate populace—old coins and/or old names for them (such as the *baiocco*) continued to circulate for some years. The *soldo* was a term of considerable antiquity, and in late nineteenth-century Naples it represented the basic unit of monetary exchange. One *soldo* equaled five *centesimi* [cents], or 1/20<sup>th</sup> of a new lira. The five-cent coin—commonly called a *soldo* in Naples and elsewhere—was not the smallest one introduced with the new Italian lira, which was based on the decimal system, but the one- and two-cent coins were of relatively limited purchasing power, even for the very poor. As Serao makes clear in "What They Eat," portions of food were sold on the streets of Naples for a single *soldo*. The largest coin circulated by the new Italian state was instead the solid silver *scudo*, which equaled 5 new lire (see "More on the Lottery," where this term appears).<sup>xvi</sup> I have in most cases chosen to include the original terminology in these translations, because there is no satisfactory equivalent for it in English.

Serao's punctuation is often idiosyncratic. In part this may result from her efforts to hybridize literary and non-literary practices of writing (journalism, reportage, etc.); in part it may reflect her desire to evoke an "oral" dimension in the text, often through recourse to rhetorical devices such as parataxis, ellipsis, accumulation, etc.; and in part this is simply one of her most strikingly personal stylistic traits. She does not seem to have been particularly interested in subsequently correcting or revising her published work, so there are likely some printer's errors in punctuation included in the originals that I have translated here. I have sought to respect her use of punctuation as far as possible, although I have sometimes had to divide or truncate her (periodic) sentences, whose length is not compatible in every case with twenty-first century English.

## NOTES TO *THE GUT OF NAPLES*

<sup>i</sup> For a brief explanation of the monetary system of post-Unification Italy, see my Translator's Note, taken from the introductory essay to the translation of parts of *Il ventre di Napoli* which first appeared in *California Italian Studies* 3.1 (2012), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5t84t40h>

<sup>ii</sup> The *basso* (or *o vascio* in Neapolitan dialect) is a typical dwelling of the urban poor in and around Naples. The doors and windows of these small ground-floor apartments open directly onto the street. There is a notable lack of privacy, natural lighting and ventilation in the *bassi*, which were often severely overcrowded. Serao's family, which lived in great poverty after returning to Naples from exile in Greece (where Matilde was born), seems to have inhabited for some time one of these squalid street-level apartments (see Anna Banti, *Matilde Serao*, Turin: UTET, 1965, 13-15). Serao remarks acidly of the 'bassi' in her introductory remarks to *Il ventre di Napoli* (45): "case in cui si cucina in uno stambugio, si mangia nella stanza da letto e si muore nella medesima stanza, dove altri dormono e mangiano." According to Antonio Buonomo, *L'arte della fuga in tempo di guerra* (Monte Porzio Catone [Rome]: Effepi Libri, 2010), 138, "i 'bassi' sono monolocali a livello strada sui quali campeggia una targa comunale con la scritta 'Terraneo non destinabile ad abitazione'." There were, however, even worse places in which to live in the Old City, such as the *fondaci*, described by the nineteenth-century Swedish physician Axel Munthe as "the most ghastly human habitations on the face of the earth" (*Letters from a Mourning City: Naples, Autumn 1884*, trans. Maude Valérie White, London: John Murray, 1887), 76.

<sup>iii</sup> Although here Serao uses the term "peperoni" or "sweet peppers," most nineteenth-century recipes for *la spiritosa* call instead for "peperoncino" or "[red] chili pepper."

<sup>iv</sup> Here too Serao employs the dialect term '*basso*' to designate these dwellings.

<sup>v</sup> The term "rapini" may be used to indicate various kinds of winter or bitter greens in southern Italy. Ironically, at least for this translator, the Italian term *rapini* is now widely used in English-speaking North America to refer to broccoli rabe.

<sup>vi</sup> Southern Italian immigrants to North America often translated the *minestra maritata* into English as "wedding soup"; but the name refers in fact only to the "marriage" of the many ingredients in the soup, not to any nuptial ceremony.

<sup>vii</sup> Serao's book denounces the dangerously unhygienic living conditions of the poor in the inner-city slums of Naples. The contaminated water supply of these populous residential quarters, especially in the Lower City—such as Mercato, Pendino, Porto, Vicaria, etc.—was among the major contributors to the terrible 1884 cholera outbreak. She emphasizes here the poverty of the Neapolitans relative to that of Italian peasants and workers elsewhere, many of whom daily drank (diluted) wine by the liter. See the fourth paragraph of “The Lottery,” where a daily liter of wine is listed as one of the chief desiderata of the poor of Naples.

<sup>viii</sup> San Gennaro (St. Januarius) is the patron saint of Naples, and is believed by the faithful to protect the city from volcanic eruptions on nearby Mount Vesuvius. His relics are kept in the Cathedral, but are regularly taken in a procession through the streets of the old city in order to forestall future eruptions or to end current ones. Two vials containing the dried blood of the saint are among the most precious of San Gennaro's relics; the blood in these vials miraculously liquefies (though not always) three times per year, in a symbolic representation of the saint's control over the lava of Mount Vesuvius. See, among others, Marino Niola, *Il corpo mirabile: miracolo, sangue, estasi nella Napoli barocca* (Rome: Meltemi, 2002 [1997]), 77-94.

<sup>ix</sup> See *Luci sulla città*, eds. Luciana Manzo and Fulvio Peirone (Savigliano (CN): Città di Torino - Archivio Storico, 2008), 59-75, for more information about the famous nineteenth-century Northern Italian lighting designer Giacinto Ottino and his work.

<sup>x</sup> So-called "soldi mercati" (marked coins), also known in the South as *gobbini* or *gobbetti*, were usually 5-cent or 10-cent coins, minted by the new Kingdom of Italy, that had been hammered into a convex or bowl shape. These served as talismans that brought good luck or amulets that would protect the bearer when rubbed between one's fingers. See, for instance, Gianni Graziosi, "Gobbini e monete talismano," *Il Giornale della Numismatica*, no. 202, December 2005: 42-49, and no. 203, January 2006: 42-47. Although Serao is here discussing superstitions among the poor of Naples chiefly concerning bad luck, she mixes these with the mention of good luck charms or omens. My thanks to Prof. Patricia Bianchi and to Prof. Pietro Maturi of the University of Naples «Federico II» for their generous assistance in deciphering Serao's use of the dialect term "soldi mercati."

<sup>xi</sup> For further information on the function of the Kabbalah in Naples, see “More on the Lottery.”

<sup>xii</sup> The *smorfia* is another, and rather ancient, term for the codified practice of dream-interpretation also known in Naples as the “Kabbalah” or “key to dreams.” The (very different)

esoteric Jewish tradition of mystical Kabbalistic interpretation of the Hebrew Bible is one of the most important possible sources of this practice in Naples and elsewhere in Italy, although the origin of the term *smorfia* may perhaps lie in a reference to Morpheus, the god of sleep.

<sup>xiii</sup> A prostitute.

<sup>xiv</sup> Serao uses the term *quarte pagine* to refer to the fourth page of the nineteenth-century daily newspaper, which carried paid advertisements.

<sup>xv</sup> Another common term for the *assistito* is *cabalista*, i.e. a person who is versed in the Kabbalah and who can provide lottery players with the right numbers, in exchange for payment. The *assistito* or *cabalista* often was also a charlatan who would perform other “miracles” or acts of magic unrelated to the lottery.

<sup>xvi</sup> See my introductory essay in [\*California Italian Studies\* 3.1 \(2012\)](#) for a brief account of the value of the *scudo* in the new decimal-based monetary system.

<sup>xvii</sup> 1 soldo = 5 centesimi; 10 soldi = 50 centesimi; 20 soldi = 1 lira.

<sup>xviii</sup> Now called Via Giuseppe Simonelli, this was the street in old Naples where butchers displayed their wares on outdoor benches or flat boards called *chianche* (*panche*): the term eventually became synonymous with butcher shops in general.

<sup>xix</sup> The Kingdom of Italy's colonial expansion into Africa had just begun at the time; the port of Assab had become Italy's first overseas colony in 1882. "Colonial products" is a catch-all term referring to coffee, tea, spices, and other such products imported from Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

<sup>xx</sup> The expression *via di sbarazzo* was used in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Naples to refer to a public thoroughfare, which no one had the right to obstruct by placing objects in it (such as market stalls, food carts, work benches, dining tables, laundry, and so on). See, for instance, Salvatore Di Giacomo, *O funneco verde* (1891), where this expression is used in Act I in exactly this way.

<sup>xxi</sup> The *scudo* is a name used for centuries prior to Unification in many parts of the peninsula to refer to a valuable gold or silver coin.