

Marianna Sirca

Grazia Deledda

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Adaptation in English: Luca Nava
Language consultant: Regina Goretti Meehan

Intermediate English

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Grazia Deledda

Grazia Deledda (1871-1936) was born in Nuoro, into a middle-class family. She was educated by a private tutor and moved on to study literature on her own, carried out through extensive reading of Italian, Russian, French and English literature of that period, and through contact with people more learned than she. Her works were inspired by the life of Sardinian peasants and their struggle. She had a regular collaboration with newspapers and magazines. She married Palmiro Madedani, a functionary of the Ministry of Finance in Cagliari. The couple moved to Rome. Despite the birth of her two sons, she managed to continue to write prolifically, publishing about a novel a year. Her best and most known works are novels ('Elias Portolu' 1903, 'Ivy' 1908, 'Reeds in the Wind' 1913, 'Marianna Sirca' 1915, 'The Mother' 1920, 'Annalena Bilisini' 1927) and collection of short stories, but she also wrote poetry, essays, theatrical works, articles on folklore, and stories for children. In 1926 she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Despite the universal character of her works, the true object of her gaze was the subject struggling between conflicting choices, sin and expiation, in the throes of a moral dilemma whose end is almost always fatalistically tragic. She died of breast cancer in Rome.

I – A Few Weeks in Serra of Nuoro

After the death of her wealthy uncle, a priest, whose estate she had inherited, Marianna Sirca had gone with her father Berte to spend a few days in the country, to their farm in the Serra of Nuoro. It was June. Marianna was worn out¹ after the years of care given to her uncle, who died after two years of paralysis.

Since she was a child, she had lived at her uncle's house in exchange for his inheritance.

The place was high, wooded, peaceful, on the border between the territories of Nuoro and Orune. After three days, Marianna looked better: her pale face under the large braids² of her glossy³ black hair had a lighter complexion⁴, and her large chestnut⁵ eyes reflected a more vivid spirit.

She was alone and quiet, nothing was missing. She was in her large estate, watched over by her father, a simple-hearted and reliable⁶ man. Her house was in Nuoro, where a faithful housemaid looked after it. She was thirty-three and had never known love.

Now her father came. He was a shepherd⁷ and had been a kind of servant to his brother priest; he was short, stooped⁸, with a big bald head, a long grey curly beard and big chestnut eyes. He said: 'How are you, my

¹ Worn out: very tired.

² Braids: hair divided into three parts and twisted together.

³ Glossy: smooth and shiny.

⁴ Complexion: skin.

⁵ Chestnut: a deep reddish-brown colour.

⁶ Reliable: trusty, authentic.

⁷ Shepherd: a person who takes care of sheep.

⁸ Stooped: with your head and shoulders bent forwards.

darling? Be happy, tonight Sebastian and his friend are coming.'

Sebastian was her second cousin; he was visiting Berte on behalf of⁹ some Ozieresi merchants, who wanted to buy cork¹⁰ from his wood of cork oaks. He was middle-aged, a widower, and among the many needy relatives who resented¹¹ her inheritance, he was the only one who showed her a little disinterested affection. Sometimes she thought Sebastian loved her, but she could not reconcile herself to the idea of marrying a widowed relative, who was no longer young.

The two came on horseback. Sebastian wore a mourning coat, and his big black eyes, which lit up his sad figure, looked at Marianna. Just as he dismounted, Sebastian greeted Marianna, putting his arms around her in a familiar but also malicious way. She rejected him angrily, intent on casting a sideways glance at the handsome young man who was approaching. She seemed to know him, although she was not sure. The man stopped in front of her like a soldier at attention. She blushed, gave him her hand and a smile changed the tone of her voice: 'Simon Sun?'

'Yes, I am,' he said, a suppressed smile of friendliness on his lips.

In reality, he was Simon Sun, the bandit. Some years before, Simon had been a servant in Marianna's house. She knew his parents, his sisters; they were a poor, honest family who lived near the hill of Santu Nofre.

Berte showed his guests in.

⁹ On behalf of: representing.

¹⁰ Cork: the outer covering of a Mediterranean tree, used for closing bottles.

¹¹ To resent: (here) to envy.

‘Marianna,’ Simon exclaimed, his face brightening, ‘it seems like a dream to see you again!’

‘Me too,’ she replied.

‘I have been looking forward to seeing you for a long time, but I was not sure if you wanted me too,’ he continued. Marianna was silent, stiff, she wanted to appear in her state of a serious woman, a rich owner, as Simon watched her affectionately.

The three men and the woman were still talking when the servant, Cristoru, arrived. He was asking Marianna for instructions for dinner. She stepped out of the room to speak to him. Your father made me kill a sheep. Please tell me what I have to cook and whether I have to make the black pudding. Marianna was in a hurry to help the servant with the dinner, whilst the three men were negotiating the price of the cork.

The table was laid; it was a slab¹² of cork, and the trays and the containers were also made of cork. The roast sheep was served. Marianna sat among the guests, her scarlet corset, made more vivid by the flame of the hearth, shining among the black figures of the men. Then came the black pudding. The evening went on, as those seated around the table talked. Simon told of Constantin, his companion of adventure, who had been forced to leave home after killing a man, who was under his command.

At night, with other comrades, he went to his mother’s house to threaten her over an unresolved question. Then they talked about the Corraines, a dynasty of bandits from Orgosolo, consumed by hatred for an unjustly divided inheritance. Simon and

¹² Slab: (here) table top.

Constantin had a matter to settle¹³ with them. They had to go through underground passages, caves, hideouts¹⁴ and down streams before they met Corraine.

‘People say that the leader Corraine is handsome, isn’t he?’ Marianna asked. Simon felt a burning sense of jealousy. ‘He’s tall, a serious man. He would like you,’ Sebastian said with a clear, naive look at her.

‘Why? It’s not beauty that makes a man,’ she remarked.

‘No beauty, no wealth, what do you want, dear cousin? You see, you let your days fall like a stream into a ravine¹⁵ without knowing where they end.’ Sebastian commented.

‘What does it matter to you?’ she replied, rather confused, and got up to help the servant clear the table. Shortly afterwards the two men took their leave.

That night Marianna could not help but¹⁶ think of Simon: from a humble servant he had become a respected guest of his masters. She remembered him as a young shepherd in her uncle’s sheepfold: thin, tall, wild olive skinned, thoughtful. On Sundays, his mother would go to Marianna’s uncle’s house, like a schoolgirl, to get news from him. Simon was good, reliable, careful, hardworking, always respectful of Marianna. Once he left the sheepfold and never returned. His family mourned for months. People believed that he had been involved in a crime and that the criminals had killed him, to prevent him from testifying. Later he made himself known, although he never returned to

¹³ To settle: to arrange.

¹⁴ Hideout: hiding place.

¹⁵ Ravine: deep valley.

¹⁶ Could not help but (idiom): was unable to do anything else except for.

the sheepfold, and Marianna had forgotten him as if he were dead.

Now he reappeared.

That night Simon prevented¹⁷ her from sleeping. Distraught¹⁸, she thought that the devil had entered her soul in the form of Simon: she was older and rich, he was younger and miserable, without a home or freedom. 'Ah, Marianna, what on earth are you doing? Here he really is in you! It's a temptation. My God, save me!' she murmured sleeplessly.

The following days passed quietly for Marianna, who stayed near her house, but never left it. She saw Sebastian again when he came to pay for the cork. Once, after the cows had returned from the pasture, Marianna decided to go for a walk beyond the holm-oak wood to a hill with a wide panoramic view. It was the first time she had dared to go that far alone. She wondered why, and the answer came from the depths of her heart: she hoped to meet Simon. Back at home, her father and the servant were asleep, the stars were twinkling and the crickets¹⁹ were chirping. She counted the days until she could return to her house in Nuoro. Suddenly she heard a step approaching. At once she recognised Simon's footsteps. There was no barking from the dogs under the oak as he approached the half-closed door.

'Good night, Marianna, are you still awake?'

'Good night, Simon. once again around these places!'

'Yet again. I went to see my mother, she is better now,' he broke into a small smile.

¹⁷ To prevent: to put a stop.

¹⁸ Distraught: extremely upset and unhappy.

¹⁹ Cricket: a small brown jumping insect.

They sat side by side on the doorstep without speaking. Soon after, he got up, slung²⁰ his rifle over his shoulder and walked away, like a traveller resting on the path before setting off again. He was back several times during the day, chatting with the shepherds, who were busy with their work, and greeting Marianna, who was busy with her housekeeping.

The day before she was to return to Nuoro, Simon stayed with Marianna. He dared to ask her: 'Do you know why I ran away from your house?'

She said that no one knew the reason.

'Well, I want to tell you,' he said, and began to tell her the story of his childhood. He said his father was ill with an incurable hernia, and his mother worked hard. The grain his father brought home was scarce, the oil from their small olive grove was in short supply and everything was scarce. His older sisters sewed clothes, although they earned little. At the age of ten, Simon began to work in a relative's olive grove, until the relative died and his debts wiped out²¹ everything he owned. He was a shepherd on Marianna's estate. Simon went on to say that one day he decided to change his life.

It was winter, a Carnival Sunday: everyone was having fun, as I thought of my sad, tired family. What was I good for, if I could not alleviate my family's misery? That night, instead of returning to the sheepfold, I went to the mountains of Orgosolo. I wanted to join a gang; it was better than being a servant all week and listening to my father's reproaches

²⁰ To sling (slung, slung): to put.

²¹ To wipe out: to destroy.