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Snyder, Jon R.

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Brief introduction to Matilde Serao's “Canituccia”

Jon R. Snyder

The humanization of nature is the naturalization of humanity.
Karl Marx

Matilde Serao (1856-1927) first published the following short story in 1883 in a collection entitled *Piccole anime* (Little Souls).¹ Although printed in Rome, the capital city of the new Kingdom of Italy, to which Serao had recently relocated from Naples, *Piccole anime* focuses on the fate of contemporary lower-class urban and rural children in and around Naples. The protagonist of this short story, which the critic Antonia Arslan has called “the equal of any short story of the era, of [any work by] Maupassant or Chekhov,”² is a seven-year-old waif nicknamed Canituccia. Serao tells her readers that the child's true name is Candida—making her literally “pure” and “innocent”—but we will see that there is no room for purity and innocence in the hardscrabble farmlands of late nineteenth-century Campania. With subtle narrative compression, these few short pages cover almost a year in the life of the little girl and her accidental animal co-protagonist. And with a sharp twist of narrative irony, the conclusion leaves little doubt that their fates always were intertwined inextricably: neither child nor animal can survive for long in a world governed, above all else, by the capitalist logic of exchange-value that relentlessly reduces beings to things.

When the story begins, Canituccia is not (yet) an orphan. Little more than an infant when abandoned by her single mother—a fallen woman known as Maria “the Redhead,” who has resorted to sex work in the city—the child has been taken in by Pasqualina Zampa, a spinster, and her bachelor brother Crescenzo, who together run a small farm north of Naples. This gesture is by no means magnanimous. For the Zampa siblings, Canituccia represents a source of virtually cost-free child labor: their costs are limited to a few rags to serve for her clothing, along with a few wretched scraps of food from time to time. Canituccia huddles on the hearth-stone to gulp down her meager supper, drinks from a bucket, and sleeps on some old hay on the floor of the farmhouse pantry. The narrator informs us that Pasqualina's pantry contains apples, *caciocavallo* cheeses and hams, although she herself “only ate a bit of meat on Sundays.” Canituccia's daily diet consists only of “a piece of bread [with] a few cold leftover beans” or “cold chicory soup, or a few chickpeas, or a bit of pork rind with bread” that she is given in the evening: otherwise, apart from an occasional piece of bread, she goes all day without food. In exchange for this, the little girl has to work long hours on the farm day in and day out, doing chores and herding animals. She has no rights of any kind, such as a right to education, to adequate nourishment, to interaction with other children, or to affection from adults. The ragamuffin is treated as if she were no better than a farm animal, and, not surprisingly, the other protagonist of the short story is exactly that: the pig Ciccotto, who becomes for a time her inseparable companion. “Canituccia”

¹ Matilde Serao, *Piccole anime* (Rome: Sommaruga, 1883).

² Antonia Arslan, “Un destino femminile. Matilde Serao tra genio, tenerezza e dissipazione,” introduction to Matilde Serao, *Il ventre di Napoli e altre storie* (Rome: Repubblica, 2004).
<https://www.repubblica.it/speciale/2004/biblioteca/intro/serao.html>, 7 December 2020.

is a tale of human-animal relations, but with a wrinkle. For in the eyes of this impoverished rural Southern Italian society, so marginal to the newly industrializing capitalist economy of Italy, a child like Canituccia is far less valuable than an animal like Ciccotto, whose body can be converted directly into cash.

After the tired seven-year-old loses sight of Ciccotto—still only a piglet—while bringing him home from pasture in the early spring dusk, Pasqualina decides to keep them tied together with a length of rope, figuring that the famished child will always return to the farm in the evening. Every day that they are roped together, Canituccia wanders off into the countryside with Ciccotto, or is dragged along behind him, in search of sources of food for the fast-growing beast. The rope is clearly meant to symbolize the interdependent destinies of human and animal: they are bound to each other, literally and metaphorically. And with the passing months a bond of reciprocity gradually does form between this odd couple. By the day the pig grows fatter and the little girl, “as thin as a broomstick,” slowly wastes away from malnourishment, with “insatiable hunger gnawing at her stomach.”

A child and an animal: this is the basic narrative building block for so many fairy tales as well as works of children's literature (*la letteratura d'infanzia*), a new genre that was just coming into its own in post-Unification Italy. Many of these fairy-tale beasts possess the power of speech or other even more magical powers, and often prove to be far wiser than their human counterparts, as is the case in Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* (first published in book form in 1883). Alas, Canituccia's chance companion is not one of these fabulous animals. There is no “once upon a time” to start the narrative; the pig possesses no powers or secret wisdom to share with her; and there is no happy ending for the protagonist or for her porcine friend. Yet this improbable duo—an illiterate cast-off child and an amiable, ever-hungry hog—fulfill one another's most essential needs. For her part, Canituccia tries to satisfy Ciccotto's voracious appetite, leading him to the best spots to forage (like the parish priest's apple tree), or gathering up acorns for him in the forest when he becomes too fat to walk out of the farmyard. For his part, the pig's presence provides great solace for the lonely little waif, who is starved for emotional security as well as for food. Canituccia, who has no one else with whom to talk during the day, speaks to the pig as if he were a dear and trusted friend, often employing terms of endearment such as “Ciccotto bello,” “Ciccotto mio,” “Ciccotto di Canituccia tua”—tender words that have never been addressed to her by any adult in her life.

From today's perspective, Serao's short story is a tale of child abuse. In these few brief pages, Canituccia is thrashed three times by adults: twice by Pasqualina and once by the farmer Nicola Passaretti, who catches the ragamuffin stealing fruit from his tree. The description of the first beating given to the seven-year-old by Pasqualina is particularly graphic (“Pasqualina punched, kicked and slapped the little girl”). The beating administered to her by the farmer in his orchard seems to have been possibly even more severe (“Nicola thrashed her like a little thief”). The narrator confirms that corporal punishment for children was the norm in the Italian countryside in this era, noting acidly that Pasqualina “sometimes ... beat Canituccia, but no more often than the other peasant women beat their own children.” Indeed, the *Ius Corrigendi* inherited from ancient Roman law, and grounded in the principle of *patria potestas*, was in the late nineteenth century still embedded in the Italian legal code, granting full authority to the parent, or head of family, to administer corporal punishment as s/he deems necessary.³ There

³ Stefania Carioli, “Historical legacies and use of corporal punishment of children in the home in Italy,” *Rivista Italiana di Educazione Familiare*, No. 1 (2020): 38. DOI: 10.13128/rief-7853. Some will be surprised to learn that

was “a right to correction and there [was] no specific rule prohibiting punishments for 'educational' purposes against children in families.”⁴ Although in 1956 the code was modified to forbid parental abuse leading to permanent physical or mental harm (article 571), even today the principle of *patria potestas* remains within the framework of Italian family law.

Yet these beatings, brutal though they may be, pale in comparison to the psychological and emotional abuse that Canituccia must endure daily at the hands of the devout spinster Pasqualina. We have already seen that Pasqualina barely speaks to the little girl except to give her orders, while denying her decent food, clothing, or even a place to lay her head at night. In a paroxysm of rage, the older woman mocks the defenseless seven-year-old because her mother has turned to prostitution, shouting “you're nothing but the daughter of a whore,” and threatens to leave the abandoned waif to “die on the street like the daughter of a bitch that you are.”⁵ Furthermore, the narrator tells us that Pasqualina “was always yelling . . . at Canituccia, and at everyone else.” Despite all this, the innocent little girl persists in calling her “*mamma*.” Kept out of school and set to work at an early age, despite laws about *la scuola d'obbligo* promulgated by the new Italian state, Canituccia is destined by her guardian for a life of illiteracy and poverty. Although Pasqualina attends weekly mass, recites the rosary every evening and sees herself as a devout Catholic, she displays no interest in providing Canituccia with even basic religious instruction, almost as if the latter were nothing more than an animal devoid of conscience, or a soul, or the need for morality and ethics. The ragamuffin is left entirely to her own devices in interpreting her world. When abruptly informed of her birth mother's death from typhoid fever, Canituccia has no intellectual or emotional means to process what is surely one of the greatest traumas that any child may endure. The little girl responds to the news blankly, without a word and without the least display of emotion: “Canituccia was told that her [birth] mother was dead, but the child didn't seem to grasp what was being said, as if she were deaf and dumb,” or (we might add) almost as if she were somehow less than human.

Of course, Serao does not leave things at that. The climactic final sequence of the story occurs just before Christmas, when preparations are made one evening to butcher Ciccotto in the farmhouse courtyard. Amid the bustle, no one says anything to the child to prepare her for the shock of witnessing the gruesome death of her only companion: “Canituccia saw everything but understood nothing.” After Ciccotto is dragged squealing into the courtyard, the little girl watches from a “dark corner” as the pig's throat is cut, his head sliced off, and his body sawed in half. The adults' “cries of joy” resound in the cold night air as they realize how much meat and “prosperity” will be theirs, thanks in no small part to the child's labor. For Canituccia, however, there will be no thanks. Nor will she benefit from the profits to be extracted from Ciccotto's lifeless body. Almost in parallel fashion, the child and the animal have been subjected to violence at the hands of these same adults: the narrative's logic suggests that, now that the animal to which she was so closely bound is dead, no more value can be extracted from Canituccia either, and her own brief life too will soon be at an end.

in Italy, according to a recent study (2018-19), “61% of girls and 66% of boys had experienced ‘mild’ corporal punishment (spanking, hitting, or slapping with a bare hand [. . .]) in the past month.” Carioli, 38, my italics.

⁴ Carioli, “Historical legacies and use of corporal punishment of children in the home in Italy,” 27.

⁵ One sign of the “literary” filter through which Serao narrates the story is, in fact, the general absence of dialect in the conversations between the characters. In this rural southern setting the cursing and swearing, like the terms of endearment, would never in the 1880s have been uttered in the Italian language, still largely—if not wholly—unfamiliar to the peasants described by Serao.

Caught up in the heat of the moment, and surrounded by abundant sausages, lard and hams, Pasqualina—uncharacteristically “thinking that the child hadn’t eaten all day and that it was a festive occasion”—decides to offer Canituccia, for her supper, “a piece of black bread [with] a little bit of fried [pig’s] blood on it.” At this moment an unexpected spark of solidarity with her fallen friend is lit within this abused little girl, whose “closed mind” instinctively makes a fatal choice. Saying nothing when offered the bread and blood, Canituccia simply shakes her head, refusing the chance to eat at last, “even though she was dying of hunger.” With these concluding words, Serao’s story makes clear to the reader that the waif’s affective bond with the huge animal not only endures, but is even stronger than her instinct for survival. Although Canituccia is literally starving to death, she will not eat of Ciccotto, because for her the pig is not a thing—a commodity for consumption or for exchange—but a fellow being, just as innocent and as undeserving of his incomprehensible fate as she is. This seven-year-old girl, with no future to which to look forward in the tragically uncaring rural society of late nineteenth-century Southern Italy, chooses not to desert her animal counterpart, in death as in life.⁶

⁶ Almost twenty-five years after the publication of "Canituccia," the prevention of child abuse in Italy became the focus of the *Comitato per la difesa dei minori*, which was founded in 1907 in Turin.

Matilde Serao, "Canituccia" (from *Piccole anime*, 1883)

Translation © Jon R. Snyder

Sitting on the wooden bench in the shadows beneath the hearth's broad black hood, Pasqualina recited the rosary with her hands under her apron. Only the *psss psss* of her moving lips could be heard as she murmured her prayers. Night was falling and there was no light left in the smoke-blackened kitchen, with its great greenish-brown wooden table, dark cupboard, and chairs with painted backs. The hearth fire, half-extinguished, lay hidden beneath the cinders.

A wooden clog banged against the closed door. Pasqualina got up and opened the door, and Teresa, also known as "Rag-head" because she had worked as a maid for the nuns in a convent in Sessa, came in with the water-bucket on her head, stooped over a bit because she was tall, thin and bony. Pasqualina helped her to put the bucket down on the floor. Teresa stood motionless for a moment, without breathing hard in spite of the great weight she had borne. Then she unwound the piece of cloth that she had used to support the bucket on her head and spread it over a chair because it was soaking wet, as were both the cotton handkerchief that she wore knotted around her head and her tousled grey locks.

In the meantime Pasqualina had lit one of those brass oil lamps with three beaks and a wick made of cotton wool that soaks in the oil, while holding up—hanging on thin brass chains—the snuffer, wick trimmer and poker. Then she opened the wooden cupboard and cut a long, thick piece of stale brown bread, added to it a small piece of strong *cacio* cheese, and gave Teresa her supper.

"And Canituccia?" Pasqualina asked.

"I haven't seen her."

"It's late and that little good-for-nothing isn't back yet."

"She'll come."

"Tere', remember that tomorrow afternoon at 1 o'clock you have to go to Carinola to carry that sack of corn."

"Yes'm."

Without eating, Teresa stuck the bread and cheese in the deep pocket of her apron. She stayed a little while longer, with her mouth half-open and her whole face dazed and devoid of expression, not displaying the least sign of weariness.

"I'm going. Good night to you, ma'am."

"Good night."

And slowly Teresa went off toward Via della Croce, where four youngsters were waiting for her in a little room for their supper.

Pasqualina stood on the threshold and called:

"Canituccia!"

No one answered. Evening had come on this February day. Pasqualina struggled to see in the darkness. She called out again loud and long:

"Canituccia, Canituccia!"

Mumbling curses, Pasqualina then went down the narrow walkway that, bisecting the vegetable garden, led from the door of the house to the front gate. From there she looked toward the Carinola road, toward the road leading from the crossroads to the church of the Blessed Virgin [*La Madonna della Libera*], and toward the single street cutting in two the little village of Ventaroli.⁷

"She must have dropped dead, that lousy girl," Pasqualina muttered.

In reply, she heard a low lament. Canituccia was sitting on the step to the front gate; hunched over, with her head almost between her knees and her hands in her hair, moaning.

"Ah, so you're here, and you don't answer me when I call? Hang you for that! What? Why are you crying? Did they give you a thrashing? And where's Ciccotto?"

Canituccia, who was seven years old, didn't answer, but moaned more loudly.

"Why'd you come back so late? And Ciccotto? Tell the truth: did you lose Ciccotto?"

The old peasant spinster's angry voice grew frightening.

Canituccia threw herself sobbing onto the ground face down, with her arms outspread. She had lost Ciccotto.

"Ah, you scamp, you murderer of what's mine, you're nothing but the daughter of a whore! You lost Ciccotto? Take this. You lost Ciccotto? Take that. You lost Ciccotto? Here's some more."

Pasqualina punched, kicked and slapped the little girl. Canituccia struggled to try to shield herself from the blows, shrieking without crying. When Pasqualina grew tired, she gave the child a shove and said in a hoarse voice:

"Listen, you little good-for-nothing, I only let you live with me out of charity. If you don't leave now and go look for Ciccotto in the countryside, and if you don't bring him back home, remember that I'll make you die on the street like the daughter of a bitch that you are."

Canituccia, who was still shrieking from the beating she'd just been given, hoisted her ragged skirt—made out of red cloth—and set off barefoot toward the road for the church of the Blessed Virgin. As she walked, she looked to her left and right in the hedges and in the farmers' fields, calling to Ciccotto in a low voice. She had lost him on the way home: she hadn't realized that he wasn't following her any longer. But in the dark of night she couldn't see anything. Canituccia walked on mechanically, stopping every so often to look around without being able to see. Her bare feet, which had turned a deep burgundy red in color from a whole winter's worth of cold, no longer felt either the ground beneath them, which was growing icy cold, or the stones over which she stumbled. She was not afraid of the night or the lonely countryside: she just wanted to get Ciccotto back. All she could hear were Pasqualina's threats not to feed her if she didn't bring him home. She felt a gnawing, intense hunger that was twisting her stomach into knots. If she

⁷ *La Madonna della Libera* is a term sometimes used in Italy to refer to Mary, mother of God.

brought Ciccotto back, she'd eat: this was her one and only thought. So she called and called to him, walking fast between the tall hedges, a tiny speck of motion in that nocturnal calm:

"Here, Ciccotto! My darling Ciccotto, where are you? Come to your Canituccia! Ciccotto, Ciccotto, Ciccotto, come to Canituccia! If I don't bring you home, *mamma* Pasqualina won't give me anything to eat. O Ciccotto, o Ciccotto!"

She came out onto the main road that leads to Cascano, to Serra, and to Sparanisi. In the gloom of night the road shone white, and the desolate child's little shadow cast strange, distorted figures on the ground. Her voice grew weary. She began to run wildly now, calling to Ciccotto with all her might. Twice she sat down on the ground, defeated and in despair: and twice she got up and started to run again. Finally, in Antonio Jannotta's field, she heard something like a small grunt, then something like a little gallop, and Ciccotto came to brush up against her feet with his snout.

Ciccotto was a pinkish-white piglet, rather chubby and round, with a grey spot on his back. Canituccia shouted with joy, took Ciccotto in her arms, and started back with the last strength left in her young legs. Laughing and talking, she hugged Ciccotto to her chest to keep him from escaping, while the piglet, with his short legs dangling in the air, grunted contentedly. Canituccia started to run, thinking that she'd once again be able to eat. From afar she spotted Pasqualina's figure at the gate, and when within earshot Canituccia shouted to her:

"I found Ciccotto, I found my darling Ciccotto!"

She soon reached Pasqualina and triumphantly handed the piglet over to her. In the darkness, Pasqualina grinned. They went back into the house and Ciccotto was put into his pen, where he ate and immediately fell asleep. Breathing heavily, Canituccia watched everything that Pasqualina did. The little girl too was hungry, like Ciccotto; she followed Pasqualina into the kitchen, looking at her with big wild eyes that were unable to ask. Then Canituccia sat down on the raised edge of the hearth, without saying a thing. The peasant woman had taken her place on the bench and returned to her rosary, praying in a passionless monotone. Canituccia, doubled over in order not to feel the spasms in her stomach, followed the prayer with her eyes. She was no longer able to think at all: she was just hungry. Only a half-hour later, when she had finished reciting the *Salve Regina*, did Pasqualina get up, open the cupboard, cut a piece of bread, put a few cold leftover beans on a little plate, and give Canituccia her supper. Still seated on the raised edge of the hearth, the girl ate hungrily. She had a small head, with a tiny white face full of freckles and frizzy hair that was a little bit reddish and a little bit yellowish, with some dirty chestnut brown mixed in for good measure. Her head was in fact too small, and set atop a scrawny body. She wore a white cotton shirt that was all patches, a waistcoat made of brown lightweight canvas, and a piece of red cloth as her skirt, held up at the waist by a short strand of rope. Her skinny legs showed, as did her bare, thin neck whose tendons looked like taut cords. Canituccia ate with a spoon made of blackened wood, and afterward went to drink from the bucket.

The peasant woman had taken up her distaff and was spinning.

"Get to bed now," Pasqualina said to the girl.

Canituccia opened the door of the pantry, where the apples were kept. She threw off her red skirt, lay down on some wretched straw bedding, pulled a rag made from an old yellow bedcover over her feet, and fell asleep. As she sat there spinning, Pasqualina thought about Canituccia with a certain diffidence. Her little servant was the illegitimate offspring of Maria "the Redhead," as she was known. With her flaming hair and carnation-red lips, Maria had first sinned with the cobbler Giambattista. But he had gone off to become a soldier, and Maria had become the lover of Gasparre Rossi, a local gentleman. Then he too deserted Maria, although it was said that Candida—nicknamed Canituccia—was his daughter. There was no doubt that Maria, after a month in Sessa, had left Canituccia and gone off, some said to Capua while others said to Naples, to work as a prostitute. Gasparre hadn't wanted to take care of the abandoned child, so she grew up in the household of Pasqualina and Crescenzo Zampa, who were sister and brother. But the girl's white face, all dotted with freckles, reminded Pasqualina of Maria the Redhead. Pasqualina—a thin and virginal spinster with bony red hands, yellow teeth, and coal-black eyes, who had never married because her brother had refused to give her a dowry—trembled with hysterical terror at the thought of Maria the Redhead's amorous follies, and didn't trust her little bastard child. So the next day, fearful that Canituccia would lose Ciccotto again, Pasqualina tied one end of a rope to the piglet's foot, and the other end around the girl's waist, in order to keep them together. Following Canituccia, Ciccotto leapt about in his haste to get to pasture. They spent the day together in the field, looking for the first spring grasses and weeds. Many times Canituccia coaxed Ciccotto to a spot where she'd seen grass growing that he might like; sometimes Ciccotto dragged Canituccia toward a green field. At noon the girl ate a piece of bread. They wandered together through the spring afternoon until dusk fell, and only separated when back at home, where Ciccotto went right to sleep and Canituccia, after having gulped down cold chicory soup, or a few chickpeas, or a bit of pork rind with bread, also retired for the night. Pasqualina was surely no greedier or fiercer than other peasant women, but she was not so well off herself and only ate a bit of meat on Sundays. Sometimes she beat Canituccia, but no more often than the other peasant women beat their own children.

Later on, in summer, Canituccia and Ciccotto were together for longer stretches of time. They left at dawn to search for corncobs, figs, and the first windfall apples, and Ciccotto had grown big and strong, while Canituccia was still skinny and weak. Sometimes Ciccotto ran too fast for the girl, and she felt herself being dragged along behind him over the cracked dry ground, worn out beneath the burning summer sun.

"Wait, Ciccotto, wait for me my dearest!" she would say, exhausted.

Then Ciccotto would go to sleep and the girl would lie, with her eyes closed, on the ground along the furrows where the wheat had been harvested, sensing the blazing sun beneath her eyelids. She would get back up on her feet again, dazed, her cheeks red and her tongue swollen. By now there was no longer any need for the rope, because Ciccotto had become obedient. Canituccia had gotten a long stick with which to herd the pig and keep him from ending up under the wheels of the carts going along the main road. They would head back home in the evening, with Ciccotto coming along slowly and Canituccia a little ahead of him, driven by the insatiable hunger gnawing at her stomach. Once they tried to steal some bitter sorb fruit in Nicola Passaretti's field, but the sorbs were terribly bitter and Nicola thrashed her like a little thief. Even

worse, Nicola told Pasqualina Zampa about it, and she too beat Canituccia. The girl went off through the fields with Ciccotto, weeping and saying to him:

"Pasqualina beat me because I'm a thief."

But Ciccotto shook his head and began to graze. Still, every so often, when an idea appeared in Canituccia's closed mind, she spoke about it to Ciccotto. When they were heading home, she told him:

"Let's go home now, and Ciccotto will go to his pen and *mamma* Pasqualina will feed him dinner, and then she'll give Canituccia some soup, and I'll eat it all."

And in the morning:

"If Ciccotto doesn't run, and if he always stays near Canituccia, then Canituccia will take him up the mountainside, to our parish priest Don Ottaviano's little tree, where she will get him lots and lots of apples to eat, while Canituccia eats some bread."

When autumn came, Ciccotto had become quite fat and hefty. Once he knocked the girl down with a blow of his head, but she got up, moved away from him, and showered him with stones. But that was the only time they quarreled. Canituccia ate less and less, and Pasqualina was sharper and sharper with the daughter of Maria the Redhead, for the harvest had been poor and the chaste old maid had a terrible suspicion that her brother Crescenzo had begun an affair with Rosella from Nocelleto: two *caciocavallo* cheeses and a ham had vanished from the pantry, and then Crescenzo had bought a gold ring for three *lire* at the market in Sessa. At home, Pasqualina became increasingly angry and stingy. She was always yelling at her maid Teresa, at the gardener Giacomo, at Canituccia, and at everyone else. On the last Sunday of the month, Don Ottaviano didn't want to give her communion because of the many sins she'd committed in her thoughts.

Then it didn't stop raining, and every day Ciccotto and Canituccia came home soaking wet. The girl put her bit of red cloth on her head, but then she only had her shirt around her legs, and as she walked through puddles of water and mud, lashed by rain, she would say to Ciccotto:

"Let's run, Ciccotto my darling, let's run because it's raining and I'm wet all over, let's run because at home there's a fire going and we can warm ourselves."

But often the fire was out, and Canituccia had to go off to sleep still soaking wet from the rain. That November, people in Ventaroli said that Maria the Redhead had died of typhoid fever in Capua and, after Mass, the parish priest used her fate as an example in his sermon, which made both Concetta, daughter of Raffaele Palmese, and Nicoletta, daughter of Peppino Morra, blush because they had some remorse on their conscience. Canituccia was told that her mother was dead, but the child didn't seem to grasp what was being said, as if she were deaf and dumb. In that same month of November, Ciccotto had become so big and so fat that he could no longer be taken to graze far from home: he had to use sober, deliberate steps to walk now. Canituccia called to him, but in vain: he no longer had enough strength to come. The first time that she left

him at home to go for firewood in the mountains, she gathered a heap of acorns in the woods, tied them up in a rag, and brought them to him.

She went to check on Ciccotto before going out to run to the fountain for water, or out to the fields to bring food to Crescenzo, or to do other errands. Upon her return, before entering the kitchen she would go to greet him again. It scared the girl a little to see him so big—and so much bigger than she was, for she was as thin as a broomstick.

One December evening, when Canituccia came back from the fountain, she found the parish priest, Don Ottavio, engaged in a lively discussion with Nicola Passaretti and Crescenzo: the three of them then went to have a look at Ciccotto before returning to their conversation. Canituccia did not understand. The next evening, however, the butcher Sabatino Carinola came to the house, as did Gasparre Rossi's servant Rosaria, to give Teresa a hand. There was great commotion in the courtyard and in the kitchen. A large cauldron had been placed over a roaring fire on the hearth: all the biggest platters, all the basins and all the buckets were ready: the scales were set up in one corner: knives, cleavers, and funnels were laid out on the kitchen table: Pasqualina, Teresa and Rosaria had put on shorter skirts and white aprons. Sabatino came and went with an air of self-importance. Canituccia saw everything but understood nothing.

In a low voice she asked Teresa:

"What are we doing tonight?"

"Christmas has come, Canitù. We're going to kill and butcher Ciccotto."

Although feeling somewhat shaky on her feet, Canituccia then went to squat in a corner of the courtyard to watch Ciccotto be killed. In the flickering light she saw them drag him into the courtyard, with Nicola Passaretti and Crescenzo holding him. She heard the pig's desperate squeals, because he didn't want to die, and she saw Sabatino's knife cut Ciccotto's throat. She watched them cut the pig's head off by slicing through the neck all the way around, before laying it on a platter on a bed of fresh laurel leaves. Then she saw his body cut in half before the halves were weighed with the scales; she heard their cries of joy when the weight was announced—over 300 pounds (1.6 *cantari*).⁸ She didn't move from that dark corner of the courtyard. Time passed: it was a freezing cold December night. They called her into the kitchen. Rosaria and Teresa were using small funnels to force sausage-meat into the pig's intestines. Sabatino and Crescenzo were dealing with the hams and the bigger hunks of lard, while Nicola was watching over the cauldron, in which little white bits of lard were melting down, to become cracklings and pork fat. In one corner of the hearth, Pasqualina was frying the pig's blood in a pan over the fire. Everyone was chattering loudly and gaily, caught up in the joy of all that meat and all that fat and all that prosperity, and inflamed by the heat of the fire and the work. Canituccia held back at the threshold, watching, but without entering the kitchen.

Pasqualina, thinking that the child hadn't eaten all day and that it was a festive occasion, took a piece of black bread and put a little bit of fried blood on it, before saying to Canituccia:

⁸ 1 *cantaro* = 89 kilos; 1.6 *cantari* = 142.4 kilos = 313 pounds.

"Eat this."

But the little girl said 'no' by simply shaking her head, even though she was dying of hunger.