

The Land of Cockaigne

Matilde Serao

THE LAND OF COCKAIGNE

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Intermediate English

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Matilde Serao

She was born in 1856 in Greece of a Neapolitan father and a Greek mother. In 1860 her family returned to Naples. After finishing her education there, she became a school teacher, later again changing occupation to work in a telegraph office. In 1882 she moved to Rome, where she married Eduardo Scarfoglio in 1884, with whom she founded 'Il Corriere di Roma', the first Italian attempt to model a daily journal along the lines of the Parisian press. The paper was short lived and Serao returned to Naples. In 1892 she founded with her husband 'Il Mattino'. Later in 1904, after the separation from her husband, she created a new newspaper called 'Il Giorno', which she edited until her death in 1927.

While pursuing her journalistic career, she wrote some forty novels and a number of short stories dealing with lower-middle-class Neapolitan life. She is distinguished by great accuracy of observation and depth of insight. The character of the people is rendered with sensitive power and sympathetic breadth of spirit. Among her works: 'Fantasy' (1883), 'Checchina's Virtues' (1884), 'The Conquest of Rome' (1885), 'A Girl's Romance' (1886), 'Farewell Love' (1809), 'The Land of Cockaigne' (1890), 'In the Country of Jesus' (1898), 'Suor Giovanna della Croce' (1901).

I – The Lotto

After midday two seamstresses¹ went along St Clare Street in Naples. In the morning the movement of people walking down from the northern quarters (Avvocata, Stella, San Carlo all'Assunta, San Lorenzo) towards the southerner ones was slowly decreasing. The two women continued towards Enterprise Alley, heading to the wine merchant's shop to buy something to eat. On their entrance they were approached by the shop assistant.

'Give us something to eat with bread please,' one of the two women said.

'Fried fish,' the boy suggested.

'No.'

'Stockfish with sauce,' proposed the shop assistant with a forthright² air.

'No,' the woman replied disgusted.

'Tripe soup.'

'No.'

'What do you want then?' replied the boy annoyed.

'I'd like some meat.'

'We don't cook meat on Saturdays, only tripe.'

'Then give me some of that stockfish.'

So the assistant prepared the dish which consisted of four pieces coming undone in a ruddy³ sauce, dotted⁴ with pepper and traces of oil on the frame of an ash grey dish.

¹ Seamstress: a woman whose job is sewing and making clothes.

² Forthright: direct and honest in manner and speech.

³ Ruddy: red in colour.

⁴ Dotted: covered in dots.

'Here's the money,' muttered one of the seamstresses called Antonetta. She stared at the stockfish flaking in the broth⁵.

'Mind you, if I got a tern⁶,' she said as she started to eat, 'I'd like to eat meat every day.'

'Meat and macaroni,' the lad giggled⁷.

'Sure, morning and evening!'

Antonetta stopped in the Enterprise Alley. It was summer. With the passing of day the alley became more crowded. Among the people gathered there was a shoeblick⁸ with his case: he was an old, hunchbacked⁹ man, wrapped in an old, patched, greenish dressing gown. His name was Michel, he sat under the porch of the Enterprise Palace. A passer-by, a worker around thirty-five or so stopped beside him, pale, dull¹⁰ eyes, a jacket on his shoulders.

'Let's clean?' the shoeblick asked.

'Yes. Today I fancy polish. If I had had more money, I would have gambled my last ticket from Catherine.'

'*Small gamble*,' muttered the shoeblick.

'Indeed, a little to the government, a little to Catherine ... you know ... they are all thieves.'

'Did you take a day off today?'

'I don't work on Saturdays,' answered Gaetan, the glove cutter, with a timid smile, 'on Saturdays I look for luck. I will find it sooner or later.'

'How can you gamble?'

'Catherine's sister lends me money.'

⁵ Broth: thick soup.

⁶ Tern: set of three winning numbers.

⁷ To giggle: to laugh.

⁸ Shoeblick: the activity of cleaning people's shoes for money.

⁹ Hunchbacked: curved.

¹⁰ Dull: not bright or shiny.

‘Strong interest?’

‘Ten cents for every lira each week. I’m indebted to her for seventy-five Lire. Every Monday she waits for me before the factory. Sooner or later I will hit the jackpot and pay her.’

‘And what will you do with the rest of the win?’ Michel asked grinning.

Gaetan, the glove cutter, answered: ‘A new suit, with a pheasant feather on the hat, and all together on a coach to have a good time at the “Two Pulcinella”, the “Field of Mars”, or the “Ace of Chalices” at Portici.’

‘Tavern for tavern.’

‘Meat and macaroni,’ added Gaetan.

‘And wine from the Mount of Procida,’ Michel produced.

‘You know, one lives only once,’ the glove cutter concluded philosophically.

‘I haven’t got a family; I can do what I like,’ said the shoeblick. ‘Ten cents to sleep, twenty to eat, the rest to gamble,’ repeated Gaetan.

By four o’clock the Enterprise Court was crowded. The motley¹¹ crowd spoke lively, looking at the first floor of the terrace, where the drawing took place. They were poor fellows, cobblers¹², coachmen, room-brokers¹³, farm-hands¹⁴, people living not from day to day, but from hour to hour, trying thousands of jobs, able to everything, though unable to find a sure and remunerative job. There were people who went hungry to bet on a ticket, there were also women, among

¹¹ Motley: varied, diversified.

¹² Cobbler: shoemaker.

¹³ Room-broker: a person who buys and sells rooms for other people.

¹⁴ Farm-hand: a person who works for a farmer.

which was Carmela, who was pale though appealing, with her big, black, tired and grieved eyes.

A tall, rosy, well-combed brown hair woman with pearl earrings, a golden necklace, a silken shawl on her shoulders, her hands full of golden rings appeared. With quiet movements, serious eye, she went through the people stopping on the third step of the stairs, to see and hear better. She was the rich usurer, Catherine's sister, the holder of the *small* gamble.

At length, with a general satisfaction, the big balcony of the terrace opened. There was silence as all eyes turned towards it. It was understandable from the lips of certain women that they were praying.



On the terrace, two secretaries from the Royal Lotto had placed a long and narrow table with a green cover covering it. Three chairs stood for the authorities: a

counsellor of the prefecture, the director of the lotto in Naples, a representative of the city council. Upon the little table stood the ballot-box for the ninety numbers. It was big, made by a metallic net, transparent, lemon-shaped, with brass stripes. Two brass supports held the container, supplied with a handle to wheel¹⁵ it.

A child appeared on the terrace; he had to draw out the numbers. He came from the orphan asylum. He wore a white suit and a white hat, according to the tradition of the lotto that wanted that the child wore the colour of innocence. All sent him a benediction; he kept silence. 'That you could always find graces, if you give me this grace,' they shouted.

The first secretary took the number to be put into the ballot-box. He showed and announced it to the people, passed it to the three authorities, and the counsellor of the prefecture enclosed the number into a round little box. The second secretary passed it to the white dressed child, who put it into the container.

At every announced number followed exclamations, cries, sneers¹⁶. At every number people destined their explanation from the "Dreams' Book", the "Smorfia", or from some popular legends.

'Two.'

'The letter! Let me get that letter, my Lord!'

'Five.'

'The hand! On the face to whom hates me!'

'Eight.'

'The Holy Virgin! Intercede for me!'

Now the first ten numbers were in the box, the second secretary closed the lid of the container and made

¹⁵ To wheel: to move in circle.

¹⁶ To sneer: to mock.

it turn. Down people shouted: 'Turn, turn, little old man!'

For the cabalists it existed only the cabala, which could do everything and did everything; for them people's cries were only uproar.

'Thirteen.'

'The candles, the torch! Put out this torch!'

'Twenty-two.'

'The mad! Like you!'

People got excited like a bizarre waving sea. Women got nervous squeezing their babies tight. Carmela held in her hand the medal of the Holy Virgin and a little coral horn. People's expectations increased like a dream which was becoming reality.

'Thirty-three.'

'Christ's age!'

'Thirty-nine.'

'The hanged man! Hang the man by the throat with a rope!'

Every ten numbers in the ballot-box, the secretary turned them around longer. The operations seemed to hasten; new shouts welcomed the number seventy-five, Pulcinella's number, and seventy-seven, the devil's number, but a long clapping greeted ninety, the last one: ninety made fear, ninety made sea.

As all the numbers were into the ballot-box, after the sound of the little ball by the counsellor, the child started the drawing: ten was the first number. Delusion was among people. The second drawing was two. Other delusion followed.

'Eighty-four,' the secretary shouted the third number. Here a boeing of indignation, complaints, curses raised against the ill luck. Seventy-five was the fourth drawing, boos continued. Forty-three was the last