THE WEDDING FEAST

By MICHELE SAPONARO

We are continuing our series of short stories by authors of various nationalities with a story taken from a country that has a splendid tradition in the art of short-story writing, Italy.

The author was born some fifty years ago in the province of Apulia, which forms the "heel" of Italy. Although considered a very modern writer, he uses a clear and simple language reminiscent of the classical style of some of the best Italian authors of the last century. Most of his stories and characters are inspired by the people of Apulia.—K.M.

The big table been had laid in the hall of the farmhouse. In days gone by this hall had been used for the harvest feast, but in lean times it had been abandoned to the storing of broken barrels, lopsided trestles, and other useless implements, till the good fortune of the new masters had caused it to be replastered and frescoed with village scenes.

It was the custom and tradition of the Casamassima family, on the eve of a wedding day, to gather all the relatives and close friends together at a feast.

Now they were waiting for the young bride, who had gone to her future grandmother to receive the customary blessing. And the bride was late in arriving.

Her delay caused no anxiety to the bridegroom, who walked up and down the long hall, from one side of the table to the other—not because he was impatient but because of his old habit of counting his steps. He had been a land-surveyor for so many years, and he had measured all the farms of the district better with his long legs than with a compass. Every ten or twelve paces he stopped, removed the spent cigar from his mouth and tapped it with his little finger, as if to shake off the ash which was not there.

He was sixty years old, and he had three young oak trees of sons aged thirty, twenty-five, and twenty-one. A widower for some time, he had decided to take a wife again, because his sons had told him that a woman was essential to the home and one could not remain a widower at sixty. He had replied that being a widower did not bother him, and in any case what was needed at home was an elderly person, not that young girl they wanted to give him.

The youngest son had been the first to ask his father to remarry. Of the three, he was the poor shepherd, while the other two looked after the cattle, the granary, and the accounts. He had asked him with that innocent manner of his, and stood looking spellbound at the girl every time he went to call on her with his father. If the father was going to marry her, he would no longer have to walk so far and so often to look at her.

The other two had observed the expression on their younger brother's face and had caught each other's eyes in a furtive, sidelong glance, each betraying to the other his secret thoughts. It had been on an evening in July, among the sheaves ranked diagonally like the tents of a vast encampment. There was a low, reddish moon on the horizon, a disk with no halo of light, and a distant fire of stubble threw conflicting lights and shadows onto the scene of houses and dense vegetation.

They said nothing to one another, but they had followed up their brother's request: also from motives of personal interest, for they knew their wealthy old
grandmother was very fond of the girl, who was distantly related to her. The eldest son had been particularly imperious, and the father always obeyed his eldest son.

Now, while the father waited for the bride who did not appear, he was not impatient; but his sons were impatient in the extreme.

Pietro, who when arguing always said he wanted to break open someone's head; Pietro, who had once boasted of freeing himself from three assailants and, with a round of blows, sending them into a ditch to keep the frogs company; Pietro, who was renowned for having broken many a heart; Pietro the first-born was sitting with his legs apart in front of a pitcher of wine. From time to time, following his thoughts with a gesture, he raised his fist threateningly behind his father's shoulders.

Paolo, the second son, was sitting with his elbows planted on the table, moving only his eyes to follow the footsteps of his father back and forth, like a hypnotized cock following the line marked out for it under its beak.

Giovanni, the youngest, was standing on the threshold, casting his gaze yonder to the end of the path, his hands visor-like over his eyes. Then he turned round and said to the others, but in a low voice as if he were talking to himself:

"Grandmother, you know how she is, she is upset and won't let her come."

He added: "It is more than half a mile to here. Once I counted the paces —nine hundred of them. Tetti, with her little steps, will take at least ten minutes. Now she will be halfway, and in five minutes she will be here."

Once he said, giving a start of joy: "Perhaps Grandmother will come too?"

Their grandmother, who was almost ninety, could not move from the house: she had not even gone out the day their mother had died.

Then it occurred to all of them that they had not thought of their grand-
the other, to reach the lattice gate. From
the gate to the house the path was firm,
and on the path were to be seen only the
marks of two wheels which had recently
passed. The elder paid no attention to
them; Paolo stared at them and tried
to follow them with his eyes, but the
traces disappeared in the stagnant water,
and beyond the water it was impossible
to distinguish them in the high grass
of the field.

They went in. The entrance hall was
empty, and from the room beyond, which
seemed plunged in silence, came only a
subdued stirring.

Before reaching the door and without
seeing his grandmother, Pietro asked:
"Where is Tetti?"

Their grandmother, bent toward the
wall, put her hands down into a wooden
chest which smelled of old, wormeaten
wood and withered quinces. She did not
turn round, nor did she reply.

"Grandmother," Pietro went on, "Tetti
came here to pay her respects to you. Where has she gone?"

The old woman said in her little,
threadbare voice, but without turning
round:

"She did pay her respects to me, and
I enjoyed seeing her. I gave her my
blessing and my wedding gift."

"But you know where she has gone."

"Look for her."

Pietro swayed back and forth on his
toes and heels, turning between his hands
the gold chain that hung across his
waistcoat. He was a giant, and standing
straight in the opening of the door he
seemed to fill it entirely, body and shadow.

"Father has sent us to look for her. Father is waiting for his bride."

Then the old woman turned round. She had a proud face which robbed the
arrogant fellow of words. She was not a
beautiful old woman, for long suffering
and arthritis had shriveled and consumed
her face, but she must certainly have
been a beautiful young woman. And
now, when pride was imprinted on her
witch-like face, it seemed to send forth a
gleam of youth.

"Your father?" she said. "Your father
has had his wife, and she was my daugh­
ter. He did not want this one, and you
have thrust her upon him."

"She is a good girl. What have you
against her?"

"Good, and honest, and beautiful.
But your father did not want her. He
had no need of her."

"The house has need of her. A house
cannot exist without women."

Pietro was the only one to speak.
Paolo stood at his shoulder, silent, but
he seemed to be prompting him.

"You have need of her. Both of you
have need of her. And you want to
marry her to your father for your plea­
sure. One of you alone did not want to
marry her, because there would have been
blood spilled. And you will divide her
between you as one divides a melon. You will eat at the same table. You have
made a pact. But it is a pact of the Devil.
And what will you get if you take the
woman? You will not have the dowry,
for that will belong to the husband."

"Father is the husband."

"But he has not married her yet."

Then the brothers came forward togeth­
er, elbow to elbow.

"Grandmother, what do you mean? What are you planning?"

"What is this talk about the dowry?"

"And what has that to do with us, the
dowry?"

The great hands of the giant, although
they did not tremble, seemed to be afraid
of approaching the old woman, and they
continued to count the links of the gold
chain across his waistcoat. The brother
kept his hands deep in his trouser pockets.
But the trembling hands of the old woman
were not afraid, and her forefinger pointed
first at one, then at the other of her
grandsons.
"This talk, as you call it, is simply that Tetti has taken the dowry. Everything I had."

And she pointed to the empty chest.

"She is a thief!" roared the two grandsons with one voice.

"I gave it to her. Did I not have the right to give it to whoever I pleased? You are the sons of my daughter, and you will have the legitimate dowry; but my possessions I have given to Tetti ... There is nothing left. I even gave her the fine linen too. That lovely fine linen that never wears out. I have given her everything. I said to her: 'Go far away. Here there are wolves who want to eat you. Here your life will be a torment, always in mortal sin. Your husband's sons will want your bed. And a bed for three is full of thorns. Blood will flow. Go far away. Hide. Go to a place of safety. Search for a safe house. Go to the Sisters; they will defend you till such time as a man comes along who will defend you himself. Find a husband of your own age, for it is not good to marry a man who could be your father.' This is what I said to her. And now that you know you can go back to your dinner."

Pietro felt that if he did not escape he would strangle the old woman; and he went out stamping like a mule. Paolo seemed meeker and more resigned, but the glances he cast where those of the wounded fox that will return when its wounds are healed. He followed his elder brother.

On the way they met Giovanni, who was coming to join them. They stepped aside to let him pass without speaking to him. But then, so as to seem cheerful, Pietro smiled and, turning, said:

"Go on, go on, so that that ugly old witch can tell you her secret."

And she did tell him. His grandmother was glad to see him, but she started with surprise, for she did not expect him so suddenly, as if by a miracle of the Lord's.

"Tetti is not here. Didn't your brothers tell you?"

"They didn't tell me, but I guessed as much. What has happened, Grandmother?"

"Are you sorry not to see her here?"

"It is as if you had taken the picture of the Madonna and turned it to the wall, just like that."

Then the old woman told Giovanni where she had sent Tetti. If he went by train, they would arrive together. He could still marry her, because with his father the Sacrament had not yet taken place. And weddings are for young people. But he must go far away, out of the district, they must take ship somewhere. Hawks have long claws . . . .

Raising her head, she looked her grandson full in the eyes, almost threateningly, as if to instill in his heart her own ancient pride:

"But you are a hunter, and you will know how to defend your wife even against hawks."