

AN ITALIAN CHRISTMAS

Festive Tales for
La Dolce Vita



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An Italian Christmas

Festive Tales
for La Dolce Vita

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A DREAM OF CHRISTMAS

Luigi Pirandello



For some time, I felt something, like the soft graze of a hand, over my head as it hung between my arms – a touch at once tender and protective. But my spirit was elsewhere, wandering in the distance through all the places I had seen since childhood; the impression of them still throbbed inside me, but not enough to subdue the longing to revisit, if only for a minute, life as I imagined it might have unfolded in them.

There was celebration everywhere: in every church, in every home, around the hearth, in heaven above, by the manger below; faces known and unknown dined together, rejoicing; there was chanting, the sounds of bagpipes, the cries of exultant children, quarrels over games of cards . . . And the roads of cities great and small, of townships, of villages in the hills or by the sea, were empty in the inhospitable night. And it seemed I was hurrying down those streets,

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LUIGI PIRANDELLO

from one house to the next, taking pleasure in the revelries of others; at each, I stopped briefly, wished them 'Merry Christmas,' then vanished . . .

I had already slipped into sleep unawares, and was dreaming. And in my dream, on those empty streets, I seemed to come upon Jesus wandering through the night, while the rest of the world, as usual, was celebrating Christmas. He walked almost furtively, pallid, withdrawn, with a hand holding his chin and his clear, sunken eyes staring intently into the void: he seemed suffused with the deepest sorrow, prey to an infinite sadness.

I turned onto the same road; but little by little, his image pulled me towards him, absorbing me, and it was as if he and I had become a single person. But my lightness disturbed me as I maundered, almost hovered, through the streets, and instinctively I stopped. Just then Jesus pulled away from me, and continued alone, still lighter than before, a feather adrift on a sigh; and I, earthbound like a swatch of black, became his shadow and trailed after him.

Then the city's roads and byways disappeared: Jesus, like a white ghost vivid with inner light, glided over a hedge of brambles stretching on endlessly, a straight line through a black expanse. Gently, he dragged me along behind him, over the brambles, and I was as long as he was tall, and the thorns pierced me all over, but didn't wound me.

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A DREAM OF CHRISTMAS

From the barbs of the brambles I leapt at last onto the soft sand of a thin strip of shore; the sea was before me, and over the quivering waters, a luminous path thinned to a tiny dot against the immense arc of the horizon. Jesus took the path traced out by the moonlight, and I was behind him, like a shadowy skiff amid the flickers on the frozen waters. The light within Jesus died out: again, we were crossing the empty roads of a large city. Now and again, he stopped to call at the humblest doorways, where Christmas, from poverty and not austere devotion, offered no occasion for merriment.

‘They aren’t sleeping,’ Jesus murmured, and taken aback by hoarse words of hatred and envy uttered inside, recoiled as if in agony; and he moaned, the marks from the nails still visible on the backs of his folded hands: ‘For these, too, I died . . .’

We went on like this, occasionally stopping, for some time, until before a church, Jesus turned to me, his shadow on the earth, and said:

‘Rise, and receive me. I want to enter this church and see inside.’

The church was magnificent, an immense basilica with three naves, with fine marble all over, gold gleaming in the vault, thronged with the faithful following along with the service conducted by officiants in clouds of incense on a lavishly adorned high altar. In the warm light of a hundred

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silver candlesticks, the gold brocades of the chasubles glinted with each movement just past the billowing of the precious lace altar cloth.

‘And for them,’ said Jesus, dwelling within me, ‘it would please me to be truly born for the first time this very night.’

We left the church, and Jesus, standing before me again and resting a hand on my breast, continued: ‘I am seeking a soul to live in again. As you see, I am dead to this world, though the world is bold enough to celebrate the day of my birth. Your soul wouldn’t be too narrow for me, were it not packed with things you should cast aside. You would have of me a hundred times over all you would lose if you followed me and left behind all you falsely deem necessary for you and yours: this city, your dreams, the comforts with which, in vain, you try to lighten your foolish suffering at the world . . . I am seeking a soul to live in again; it could be yours, it could be anyone’s, so long as his heart were pure.’

‘The city, Jesus?’ I replied in dismay. ‘What of my home, and my loved ones, and my dreams?’

‘You would have of me a hundred times over all you would lose,’ he repeated, removing his hand from my breast and looking at me firmly with those clear, sunken eyes.

‘I can’t, Jesus . . .’ I said, after a moment’s confusion. Ashamed and discouraged, I let my arms drop to my body.

As though the hand whose weight I felt on my bowed

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A DREAM OF CHRISTMAS

head at the beginning of my dream had thrown me into the hard wood of the table, I jerked awake, rubbing my numbed forehead. Here it is, Jesus, here is my torment! Here, forever, with no respite, I fret with a heavy head, morning, noon, and night.

1896

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CHRISTMAS EVE

Camillo Boito



This is my poor Giorgio's manuscript: the Giorgio that I taught to read, and write, and so many other fine things. And often, as a child, he would stand on one side of me, and poor Emilia on the other, and they would smother me with kisses. I remember that one day Emilia suddenly said to me, 'Maria, you have a white hair!' And she tried to pull it out. My hair was my greatest pride. Twenty years later, Giorgetta, who is now in heaven, was sitting on my lap, and she said to me in the same voice and with the same wonder as her mother, 'Maria, you have a black hair!' And she pulled a face, because she liked these snow-white curls of mine.

There is nothing about my Giorgio that I do not love. But this manuscript, which I don't much understand, wrings my heart and makes me weep. I find no peace except in church, praying to God. I would have given my own good health, my

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life, to see those three dear children, who are no longer with me, well and happy.

SIGNOR GIORGIO'S MANUSCRIPT

I had been suffering terrible stomach pains for several days. I could not eat. I had been dining alone at the Cavour Inn that evening, and I had to leave the table after the soup. The room was cold and virtually empty. There were three Germans, sighing at every mouthful, and a Frenchman, in despair at not knowing whom to bore to death, chatted desultorily with the waiters, saying that for him there had never been any such thing as Easter, or Christmas, or New Year's Day, or any other women's foolishness or childish nonsense. Then, happy to have solemnly professed his strength and freedom of spirit, he stuck his snout into his plate.

In the street, the reddish, almost dark glow of the streetlamps could be picked out, one by one. But the very thick fog was suffused with a pale whitish glimmer, both brighter and denser around the lamps, by which it was barely possible to discern a stretch of shining wet pavement, the dim shadow of a person who bumped into you in passing, the indistinct shape of a

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CHRISTMAS EVE

carriage driving by, cautiously and soundlessly. Otherwise, the streets, usually so full of people and vehicles, were almost deserted: the silence seemed full of pitfalls. Everything became vast and mysterious. You lost your bearings. You suddenly found yourself at the corner of a street that you thought was still some distance ahead, or you assumed you had reached a crossing that was farther on. You sought your way through the mist, soaked through, stiff with cold, suspecting that you had turned deaf and blind.

I stumbled on the steps projecting from the church of San Francesco, and a woman's cry emerged from the thick fog. Then a ragged child came running between my legs, begging for money, and wishing me a Merry Christmas, or some such thing. I pushed him aside. I gave him nothing. He persisted. I threatened him. I was in an ugly state of mind. In the Galleria, a reeling drunkard was singing some tedious old song. Under the portico in the Piazza del Duomo, there were two police officers walking along slowly, with measured steps.

In the narrow streets beyond Piazza Mercanti, the fog, trapped between the tall houses, had thinned a little. You could see that all the shops were shut, even the inns had their doors closed. But high-spirited sounds of merriment emerged from windows here and

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there. Happiness reigned in every dining room. I heard the clinking of glasses, shrieks of joy, loud choruses of vulgar, shameless laughter. It was an orgy – but the blessed orgy of the family. I stopped to listen beneath one of the noisiest balconies. At first I could make out nothing at all, then gradually I managed to distinguish voices amid the great clatter of plates and glasses. A child was shouting, ‘Mama, another slice of panettone.’ Someone else was clamouring, ‘Papa, another drop of wine.’ And I could tell what the mother and father were saying, and I could just see the jovial grandfather and smiling grandmother. I pulled up the collar of my coat over my ears.

I did not know what to do. The streets were like a graveyard, the theatres were all closed; owing to the Christmas holiday there were no newspapers. I was all by myself, alone in Milan, where I had no friends, male or female, no acquaintances: alone in the world. This time a year ago, on Christmas day, after lunch in the handsome dining room of our house in Via di Po, I had been down on the carpet, with Giorgetta and her little friends making me give them horse rides, climbing on my back and using the whip. And Emilia chided me, ‘Really, Giorgi, shame on you: playing with children at the age of twenty-three.’ And she said to Giorgetta,

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CHRISTMAS EVE

'Leave your uncle in peace.' But the children, taking no notice, continued to dance round me, and to deafen me with their cries. I then got to my feet and picked them up in my arms, one at a time, giving them the last of the sugared almonds and a kiss on the cheek.

What happiness! Such happiness!

The walk and the fog had given my body a great hunger that frightened me. The immoderate and indiscriminate amounts of pepsin that I had taken in the last few days, which had not achieved anything except to make the excruciating pains in my stomach worse than ever, were probably doing what they were supposed to all of a sudden, and stimulating gastric activity. I felt as if I could devour an ox, but unfortunately I had long grown accustomed to the dreadful tricks of the pylorus. And yet that evening I had a restless desire to have a good time. Even the grief that usually overwhelmed me completely, allowing no opportunity for boredom, gave way to yawns. For the first time in a month – since my beloved Emilia had placed her hand, already cold, on my hair, while I hid my tears in her pillow; since I had fled from Turin and gone wandering from place to place through Italy – I felt the want of some distraction, the need to talk to someone, to open my heart to a friend, a woman, or a doctor, and to tell of my moral

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anguish, and physical agony. A renewed selfishness grew within me. I regretted not being in Turin, where I would have dined, and chatted and wept, with kind-hearted Maria. A little before it was time to go to bed, she would have whispered to me, in that very meek voice of hers, 'Signor Giorgio, for pity's sake, have a little faith. Listen: do your old nurse a kindness, say the rosary with me. Go on, be a good fellow: it won't take long. Then, you'll see, God and the Madonna will instill a great resignation into your heart, and you will gradually be filled with the peace and comfort of the just. Giorgetta and Signora Emilia are praying for you. You could get closer to them by praying a little, too, Signor Giorgio.' And to see the face of that woman who is almost a mother to me smile with sublime gratification, I should probably have done as Emilia used to; I should have knelt and said the rosary responses.

I found myself near the Biblioteca Ambrosiana. Whenever I walked without knowing where I was going – and this was something that was always happening to me – my legs would carry me to the streets in that vicinity. In one of these streets lived a shop girl that I had noticed on the second day of my brief stay in Milan. Afterwards, I had gone back to see her three or four times, virtually every evening in fact, at about five

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CHRISTMAS EVE

thirty: the time of day when it is already dark and the street lights come on; when the to-ing and fro-ing of people hurrying home for dinner, and the coming and going of carriages, cast a certain busy impatience even upon the quiet stroller, thrilling his imagination.

I feel a deep shame in confessing it, but this milliner had attracted me because of her resemblance to Emilia. My grief was heightened by a vague sense of remorse. By seeking out and studying – as instinct irresistibly compelled me – certain minute and fleeting similarities between my beloved Emilia's appearance and that of the women I met, and even the photographs that I saw, I felt I was profaning her sacred memory. And all too often I was then forced to acknowledge that these resemblances existed only in my imagination. The number of times I had stood for half an hour staring in a photographer's shop window! And yet I had in my wallet four different portraits of Emilia, as well as three of Giorgetta that could have been three pictures of Emilia as a child. Nevertheless, during the five days I was in Florence, I remember having gone twice to the far end of the Corso di Porta Romana, even though it was raining, specially to look at an attractive little head in a picture framer's shop, in among a great many stiff sergeants of the line and a great many ugly countrywomen all decked in frills; a

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