

7 BEST SHORT STORIES BY **GIOVANNI VERGA**

EDITED BY AUGUST NEMO



TACET BOOKS

7 BEST SHORT STORIES

Giovanni
Verga

EDITED BY

August Nemo

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The Author

Giovanni Verga was born into a prosperous family of Catania in Sicily. He began writing in his teens, producing the largely unpublished, but currently quite famous, historical novel *Amore e Patria*; then, although nominally studying law at the University of Catania, he used money his father had given him to publish his *The Carbonari of the Mountain* in 1861 and 1862.

He moved to Milan in 1872, where he developed his new approach, characterized by the use of dialogue to develop character, which resulted in his most significant works. In 1880 his story collection *Vita dei campi* (*Life in the Fields*), including "Fantasticheria" ("Daydreaming"), "La lupa" ("The She-wolf"), "Jeli il pastore" ("Jeli the Shepherd"), "Pentolaccia" ("The Plaything"), and *Rosso Malpelo*, most of which were about rural Sicily, came out. It also included "Cavalleria rusticana" ("Rustic Chivalry"), which he adapted for the theatre and later formed the basis for several opera librettos including Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* and Gastaldon's *Mala Pasqua!*. Verga's short story, "Malaria", was one of the first literary depictions of the disease malaria.

In 1894 Verga moved back to Catania, to the house in which he had lived as a child. In 1920 he was appointed Senator of the Kingdom (Senatore del Regno) for life (*ad vitam*). He died of a cerebral thrombosis in 1922.

Rosso Malpello

They called him Malpelo, which means 'evil-haired,' because he had red hair: and he had red hair because he was a bad, malicious boy, with every promise of growing up into a first-rate rascal. And so all the men at the red-sand pit called him Malpelo, till even his mother had wellnigh forgotten his baptismal name, hearing him always called by the other.

For the rest, she only saw him on Saturday evenings, when he came home with the few pence of his week's earnings; and seeing that he was malpelo, there was always the risk that he'd kept back a few of the same pennies; so that, to make doubt sure, his elder sister always received him with clouts and abuse.

However, the owner of the pit had confirmed what he said, that the wages were so much, and no more; and too much at that, in all conscience, for a little brat whom nobody else would have had around, whom everybody avoided like a mangy dog, giving him the taste of their boot when they found him in reach.

He was in truth an ugly chip, surly, snarling, and wild. At midday, while all the other workmen of the pit were sitting together eating their soup, and having a bit of talk, he would go off to squat in some corner, with his basket between his legs, to gnaw there alone his supply of bread, after the manner of animals of his sort: and the others called out something jeering to him, or threw stones at him, till the boss sent him back to work with a kick. All the same, he grew fat between the kicks, and he let them work him like the grey donkey, without daring to complain. He was always ragged and dirty with red sand, since his sister had got married, and had other things to think of; at the same

time he was as well known as the dandelion is, by everybody in Monserrato and Carvana, so much so that the pit where he worked was called Malpelo's pit, which annoyed the owner considerably. Altogether they kept him out of pure charity, and because his father, Master Misciu, had been killed in the pit.

He had been killed in this way: One Saturday he wanted to stay behind to finish a job he was doing as piece-work, which was a pillar of solid sand they had left long ago to keep up the roof of the pit, and now was no longer needed, and which, he had estimated roughly with the master, would contain some thirty-five or forty loads of sand. But there was Master Misciu digging away for three days, and the thing even then wasn't finished, but would take another half-day on Monday. It had turned out a mean piece of work and only a poor owl like Master Misciu would have let himself be taken in to such an extent by the master; but it was for that very reason they called him Dummy Misciu, he was the jackass for all the hard work in the sand-pit. He, poor devil, let them talk, and was satisfied to earn his bread with his two hands, instead of turning his fists against his companions and starting trouble. Malpelo used to make an ugly little face, as if all those frauds and insults fell on his shoulder, and little as he was, his eyes darted such looks as made the men say to him: 'Get out! You'll never die in your bed, like your father.'

However, neither did his father die in his bed, good-natured creature as he was. Uncle Monmu, with the lame hip, had said that he wouldn't have tackled that pillar not for twenty guineas, it was so dangerous; but then, on the other hand, everything is risky in a pit, and if you were going to stop to think of danger, you'd better go and be a lawyer, and have done with it.

So on the Saturday evening Master Misciu was still scraping away at his pillar, after the Ave Maria bell had rung long ago, and all his fellow workmen had lit their pipes and gone off home, telling him to wear his guts out for love of the boss if he liked, and advising him to mind he didn't get trapped, like a rat. He, who was used to jokes, took no notice, replying only with the Ah! Ah! of his heavy, full-length strokes with the pick; but inside he said: 'That's for the bread! That's for the wine! That's for the new frock for Nunziata!' and so he went on keeping count of how he would spend the money for his 'stint', his job.

Outside the pit the sky was swarming with stars, and down there the lantern smoked and swung like a comet; and the great red pillar, disemboweled by the strokes of the pick, twisted and bent forward as if it had belly-ache and were also saying, Oh dear! Oh! Malpelo kept clearing away the dirt, and he put the empty sack and the wine-flask and the mattock safely aside. His father, who was fond of him, poor little chap, kept saying: 'Go back!' or 'Look out! Look out! Watch if any little stones or coarse sand fall from the top!' All at once he said no more, and Malpelo, who had turned to put the irons back in the basket, heard a deep and suffocated noise, like the sand makes when it comes down all at once; and the light went out.

In the evening when they came in a great hurry to fetch the engineer who directed the work in the pit, he happened to be at the theatre, and he wouldn't have changed his seat in the stalls for a throne, for he was devoted to the play. Rossi was playing Hamlet, and there was a splendid audience. Outside the door all the poverty-stricken women-folk of Monserrato were gathered, screaming and beating their breasts for the great misfortune which had happened to Mrs. Santa, she alone, poor thing, saying nothing, her teeth chattering as if it were icy January. When they told the

engineer that the accident had happened about four hours ago, he asked them what was the good of coming for him, four hours after? Nevertheless, he set off, with ladders and torches, taking two hours more, which made it six, and then the lame man said it would take a week to clear the pit of all the stuff that had fallen.

Talk about forty loads of sand! Sand had come down like a mountain, all fine and burnt small by the lava, so that you could knead it with your hands, and it would take double of lime. You could go on filling cart-loads for weeks. A fine thing for Dummy Misciu!

The engineer went back to see Ophelia buried; and the other miners shrugged their shoulders, and went home one by one. Amid all the dispute and the chatter they took no heed of a childish voice, which no longer sounded human, and which cried wildly: 'Dig for him! Dig here, quick, quick!' 'Ha!' said the lame old man. 'It's Malpelo! Where has Malpelo sprung from? If you hadn't been Malpelo, you wouldn't have escaped either! No, my boy!' The others began to laugh, and somebody said he had his own devil to look after him, another said he had as many lives as a cat. Malpelo answered nothing, neither did he cry, but away there in the hole he was at it digging out the sand with his fingernails, so that nobody knew he was there. Only when they drew near with the light they saw him, his face distorted, his eyes glassy, his mouth foaming, so that they were afraid; his fingernails were torn, and hung bloody and ragged from his hands. Then when they wanted to take him away, there was a terrible scene; since he could no more scratch, he bit like a mad dog, and they had to seize him by the hair and drag him, to get him away alive.

Nevertheless, he came back to the pit after a few days, when his mother came crying, bringing him by the hand: since you can't always find bread lying about, ready to eat.

Now moreover, they couldn't keep him away from that gallery in the pit, and he dug away furiously, as if every basket of sand he removed were lifted from his father's breast. Sometimes, as he was working with the pick, he suddenly stopped still, with the pick in the air, his face grim and his eyes wild, and it seemed as if he were listening to something which his familiar demon was whispering in his ears, from beyond the mountain of fallen sand. Those days he was more gloomy and wicked than usual, so that he hardly ate anything, and threw his bread to the dog, as if it were not good food. The dog liked him, because dogs only care for the hand that gives them bread. But on the grey donkey, poor creature, so crooked and thin, was vented all the force of Malpelo's wickedness: he beat it mercilessly, with the handle of his pick, muttering: 'So you'll croak all the sooner!'

After the death of his father it was as if the devil had entered into him, he worked like those ferocious buffaloes which you have to manage by the ring in their nose. Knowing that he was Malpelo, he set himself out to be as bad as he could, and if any accident happened, if a miner lost the wedges, or if a donkey broke its leg, or if a piece of the gangway fell in, they always knew he had done it; and he for his part took all their ill-treatment without a word, exactly like the donkeys which curve their backs under the blows, and then go on in their own way again. With the other lads, again, he was downright cruel, and it seemed as if he wanted to avenge himself upon those weaker than himself, for all the ills he imagined had been done to him and to his father. Certainly he took a strange pleasure in recalling one by one all the injuries and exactions that had been put upon his father, and the way they had let him die. And when he was alone, he would mutter: 'They're just the same with me! And they called my father Dummy because he didn't do the same to them!' Another time, when the

boss was going by, the boy followed him with a sinister look: 'He did it, for thirty-five loads!' And again, looking after the lame old man: 'Him as well! And he laughed into the bargain! I heard him, that night!'

By a refinement of malignity he seemed to have taken under his protection a poor lad who had come to work a short while back at the pit, a boy who had injured his thigh in a fall from a bridge, and was no longer able to be a bricklayer's labourer. This poor youth hobbled as he carried his basket of sand on his shoulder, till you'd think he was dancing a tarantella, which set all the men in the pit laughing, so that they nicknamed him Frog; nevertheless, working underground there, frog though he was, he earned his daily bread; and Malpelo even gave him some of his, for the pleasure of being able to tyrannize over him, the men said.

To tell the truth, he tormented him in a hundred ways. Now he beat him without reason or pity, and if Frog didn't defend himself, he hit him harder, with greater rage, saying to him: 'Oh, you dummy! You dummy! If you haven't got the spunk to defend yourself from me, when I don't hate you, how do you think you're going to let the other lot jump on your face!'

Or if Frog was wiping away the blood from his nose and mouth: "Now if it hurts you when somebody hits you, you'll learn how to hit 'em yourself!" When he drove a loaded ass up the steep incline from the underground works, and saw it digging in its hoof-toes, loaded beyond its strength, curved up under the weight, panting, its eye dead, then he beat it mercilessly with the handle of his pick, and the blows sounded dry upon the shins and the exposed ribs. Sometimes the animal bent itself double under the beating, but, put forth its strength as it might, it could not take another step, and fell on its knees, and there was one of