

**THE HOUSE BY  
THE MEDLAR TREE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649607365

The House by the Medlar Tree by Giovanni Verga & Mary A. Craig & W. D. Howells

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**GIOVANNI VERGA & MARY A. CRAIG & W. D. HOWELLS**

# **THE HOUSE BY THE MEDLAR TREE**



GIOVANNI VERGA

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THE  
HOUSE BY THE MEDLAR-TREE

THE TRANSLATION

BY MARY A. CRAIG

AN INTRODUCTION

BY W. D. HOWELLS

NEW YORK  
HARPER & BROTHERS, FRANKLIN SQUARE

1890

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## INTRODUCTION.

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ANY one who loves simplicity or respects sincerity, any one who feels the tie binding us all together in the helplessness of our common human life, and running from the lowliest as well as the highest to the Mystery immeasurably above the whole earth, must find a rare and tender pleasure in this simple story of an Italian fishing village. I cannot promise that it will interest any other sort of readers, but I do not believe that any other sort are worth interesting; and so I can praise Signor Verga's book without reserve as one of the most perfect pieces of literature that I know.

When we talk of the great modern movement towards reality we speak without the documents if we leave this book out of the count, for I can think of no other novel in which the facts have been more faithfully reproduced, or with a profounder regard for the poetry that resides in facts and resides no-

where else. Signor Verdi began long ago, in his *Vita dei Campi* ("Life of the Fields") to give proof of his fitness to live in our time; and after some excursions in the region of French naturalism, he here returns to the original sources of his inspiration, and offers us a masterpiece of the finest realism.

He is, I believe, a Sicilian, of that meridional race among whom the Italian language first took form, and who in these latest days have done some of the best things in Italian literature. It is of the far South that he writes, and of people whose passions are elemental and whose natures are simple. The characters, therefore, are types of good and of evil, of good and of generosity, of truth and of falsehood. They are not the less personal for this reason, and the life which they embody is none the less veritable. It will be well for the reader who comes to this book with the usual prejudices against the Southern Italians to know that such souls as Padron 'Ntoni and Maruzza la Longa, with their impassioned conceptions of honor and duty, exist among them; and that such love idyls as that of Mena and Alfio, so sweet, so pure, and the happier but not less charming every-day romance of Alessio and Nunziata, are passages of a life supposed wholly



benighted and degraded. This poet, as I must call the author, does again the highest office of poetry, in making us intimate with the hearts of men of another faith, race, and condition, and teaching us how like ourselves they are in all that is truest in them. Padron 'Ntoni and La Longa, Luca, Mena, Alfio, Nunziata, Alessio, if harshlier named, might pass for New England types, which we boast the product of Puritanism, but which are really the product of conscience and order. The children of disorder who move through the story—the selfish, the vicious, the greedy, like Don Sylvestro, and La Vespa, and Goosefoot, and Dumb-bell, or the merely weak, like poor 'Ntoni Malavoglia—are not so different from our own images either, when seen in this clear glass, which falsifies and distorts nothing.

Few tales, I think, are more moving, more full of heartbreak than this, for few are so honest. By this I mean that the effect in it is precisely that which the author aimed at. He meant to let us see just what manner of men and women went to make up the life of a little Italian town of the present day, and he meant to let the people show themselves with the least possible explanation or comment from him. The transaction of the story is in the

highest degree dramatic; but events follow one another with the even sequence of hours on the clock. You are not prepared to value them beforehand; they are not advertised to tempt your curiosity like feats promised at the circus, in the fashion of the feebler novels; often it is in the retrospect that you recognize their importance and perceive their full significance. In this most subtly artistic management of his material the author is most a master, and almost more than any other he has the rare gift of trusting the intelligence of his reader. He seems to have no more sense of authority or supremacy concerning the personages than any one of them would have in telling the story, and he has as completely freed himself from literosity as the most unlettered among them. Under his faithful touch life seems mainly sad in Trezza, because life is mainly sad everywhere, and because men there have not yet adjusted themselves to the only terms which can render life tolerable anywhere. They are still rivals, traitors, enemies, and have not learned that in the vast orphanage of nature they have no resource but love and union among themselves and submission to the unfathomable wisdom which was before they were. Yet seen aright this picture of a

little bit of the world, very common and low down and far off, has a consolation which no one need miss. There, as in every part of the world, and in the whole world, goodness brings not pleasure, not happiness, but it brings peace and rest to the soul and, lightens all burdens: the trial and the sorrow go on for good and evil alike; only, those who choose the evil have no peace.

W. D. HOWELLS.