

## CASE STUDY

### A girl from Ciociaria

The following extract is taken from 'A girl from Ciociaria,' a short story in the *Roman Tales* collection published in 1957 by the Italian writer Alberto Moravia (1907–90). The story is set in the years following World War II and tells of a professor who hires a girl from the Ciociaria<sup>1</sup> as his housemaid. Simple, rustic and illiterate, indeed almost wild, the girl is induced by her boyfriend to steal valuable books from her employer and to sell them. The narrator is the porter of the apartment block where the professor lives.

The porter said to the professor: 'the girls from Ciociaria are real country girls, peasants, illiterate.' It was this last word, particularly, that pleased the Professor. 'Illiterate . . . that's exactly what's needed . . . At least she won't read the comic strips . . . illiterate.'

The Professor was an old man, with a white pointed beard and a moustache, who taught at the high school. His books were as precious to him as the smell of a rose, and woe betide anyone who touched them.

A girl from Ciociaria . . . whose name was Tuda and who was not yet twenty . . . (entered professor's service as a maid). Tuda has one defect: she could neither read nor write . . . (but) that was just what the Professor wanted – someone who was illiterate.

. . .

As I went out, I heard the Professor explaining to her:

'Now mind, you must dust all these books every day with a feather-mop and a duster.'

She asked, then: 'What d'you do with all these books? What use are they to you?' And he replied: 'To me they are what your spade is to you, at home . . . I work with them.'

'Yes,' she said 'but I have only one spade.'

. . .

A couple of weeks went by, and then one day the Professor looked into the porter's lodge, called me aside and, lowering his voice, said to me:

'I say, Giovanni – that girl is honest, isn't she?'

'I am sure she is, Professor,' I said; 'Ignorant but honest.'

'It may be so,' he said, unconvinced, 'but five valuable books of mine have disappeared . . . I shouldn't like . . .'

I protested once again that it could not have been Tuda, and I was sure he would find the books again. But I was worried, I confess, and I decided to keep my eyes open.

(One evening when the professor was not at home, the porter surprised Tuda while she was removing large leather-bound books from the shelves and handing them to Mario, her boyfriend.)

'Well done, Tuda . . . Well done, both of you . . . I have caught you now . . . The Professor told me about this and I didn't believe him . . . Well done indeed.' . . .

She listened to me with bowed head, without saying a word; then she raised her eyes, which were perfectly dry, and said: 'Well, who's been robbing him? I always give him back the whole of the money that's left after I have done the shopping . . . I don't do what other cooks do, who charge everything up twice over.'

'You wretched girl . . . Haven't you been stealing books? Isn't that called stealing?'

'But he's got such a lot of books.'

'A lot or a little; you're not to touch them . . . And now mind, if I catch you again, back home you go, in double-quick time.'

At the time she refused, obstinately, to see reason or to admit, for a single moment, that she had been guilty of stealing. But a few days later, in she comes to the porter's lodge, with a parcel under her arm.

'Here they are,' she said, 'here are the Professor's books . . . I've brought them back, so he can't have anything to complain of now.'

I told her she had done the right thing, and thought to myself that, after all, she was a good girl and that it had been entirely Mario's fault. I went up with her in the lift and then went into the flat with her, to help her put the books back in their places. Just at that moment, as we were undoing the parcel, in came the Professor.

'Professor,' I said, 'here are your books . . . Tuda has brought them back . . . She had lent them to a friend of hers to look at the pictures.'

'That's all right, that's all right . . . We won't mention it any more.'

With his overcoat on and his hat still on his head he felt upon the books, took up one of them, opened it and cried out: 'But these aren't my books.'

'How d'you mean?'

'Mine were archaeological books,' he went on, feverishly turning the pages of the other volumes, 'and here are five volumes on law - and odd volumes at that.'

'Will you kindly tell us what you've done?' I said to Tuda.

At this she protested violently. 'It was five books that I took, and five books I've brought back . . . What's the trouble? . . . I paid a lot of money for them - more than what they gave me when I sold them.'

The Professor was so astonished that he looks at me and at Tuda open-mouthed, without saying a word.

'Now just look,' Tuda went on, 'They're the same bindings – even better ones . . . Look at them . . . They weigh just the same, too; I had them weighed, and they came to four and a half kilos – just the same as yours.'

The Professor, at this, started to laugh, but it was a bitter kind of laughter.

'Books don't go by weight like – like veal,' he said. 'Each book is different from another . . . What am I to do with these books? . . . Don't you see? Each book contains different things . . . By different authors.'

It was impossible to make her understand. She went on repeating, stubbornly: 'Five there were, and five there are now . . . They had bindings and these have bindings . . . That's all I know.'

To cut a long story short, the Professor sent her back into the kitchen, saying, 'Go and do your cooking . . . That's enough . . . I don't want to get irritated.'

Then, when she had gone, he said to me: 'I'm sorry . . . she's a dear girl, but really a bit too rustic.'

'It was you who wanted her, Professor.'

'*Mea culpa*,' said he.

(*Roman Tales*: 106–13).

## Note

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- 1 A country district to the south-east of Rome. The name is derived from *ciocia*, the shoe worn by the local peasants, which resembles the Roman sandal, being formed of a piece of leather fastened by straps round the calf of the leg.