



AS A FINE DAY

Story of an inexhaustible friendship between Emilia-Romagna and Sierra Leone

Texts by Caterina Maggi
Illustrations by Giovanni Cavicchi
Translation by Emily Sfriso

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UN'AMICIZIA INESAURIBILE

ISTITUTO ITALIANO DI SCIENZE E LETTERE

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PrefACE

RUSHED responses

“My friend John Kanu is doing a great job in Sierra Leone. He needs help. Anyone want to give it to him?”

The Facebook post sounds something like this. It is Stratford Caldecott, Oxford academic. Early 2013. The previous summer, this mild-mannered and intelligent man had accepted an impudent invitation to come to San Benedetto del Tronto, the outskirts of any empire, to give a lecture. Having read his writing on Chesterton, Tolkien and distributism, I wanted to meet him and show him our realities. He immediately accepted and I was worried: when someone declines, it is almost better, I always say: it will be better this way. But if an Oxford academic accepts, you think about you, about you historical and cultivated innaccuracy, and you say: so what? The thing went better than expected: we became friends with him and his family, we discovered many things in common, and started supporting each other.

If you try to take seriously what God puts in front of you (always armed with the same innaccuracy, don't worry!) inexplicable things for this world's deterministic criteria, arise. Put Oxford, San Benedetto del Tronto and Sierra Leone together? Even this is possible!

I replied: *“What can I do for John Kanu, dear Strat?”*. I feel indebted to him, who had accepted the crazy Italians' invite, I want to reciprocate. I barely know about John Kanu. They say he has something to do with my dear distributism, but who knows what he really does, and then he's in black Africa... As I impulsively reply, or rather, rushed answer already given, I search the internet for at least his face, and come across a few dry posts by Stratford on his blogs (how nice it would be to have his

depth and his capacity for synthesis!), a few photos from which I understand that John and I are more or less the same age and that we love Chesterton. I say: what does that have to do with it? How did Chesterton get over there? Therefore, too many crossroads, and then by then the trouble was done...

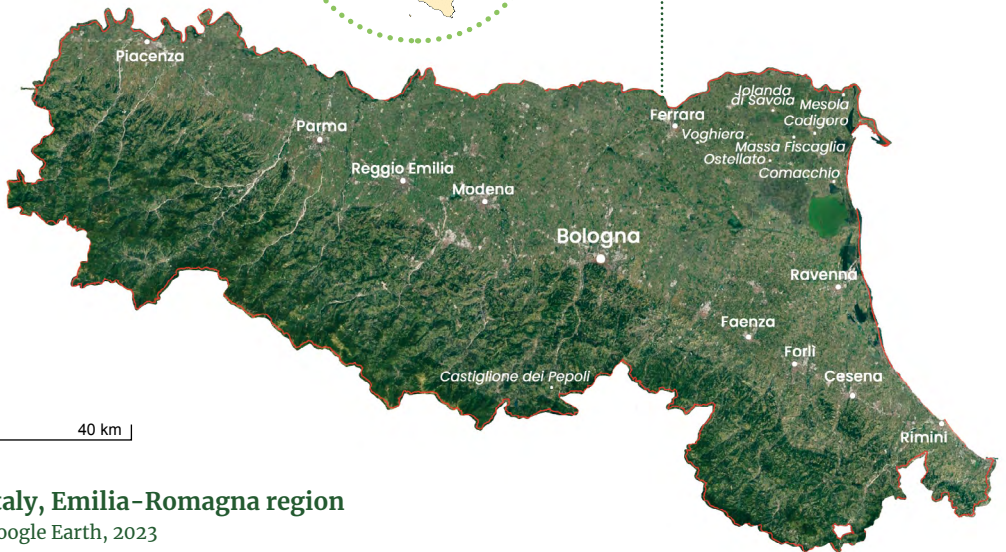
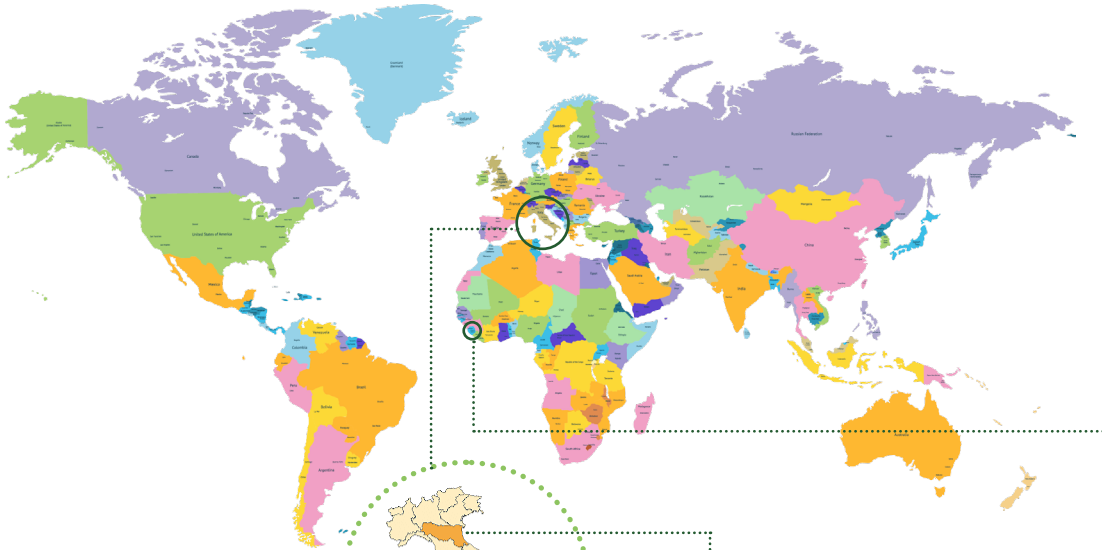
Shortly afterwards Stratford sends me a message: “*I knew you would reply!*”. I don’t, I tell myself. And I get an email from John. I contact him saying that in Italy we want to understand what he needs, and I hope to solve it with few thousand euros collected among our Brotherhood friends in Italy. As I am, this would already be a good job: I’m not an organiser, even less a fund raiser. John replies to me in no time with an e-mail full of hope and a copious and punctual report in English from which I understand that he is not someone who can be tricked, and in which he explains in technical terms all his ardent desire to give his people real hope with a vocational school, to built which everything is lacking. The help required is to buy tools, for which ten thousand British pounds are needed.

I speak in panic to my wife who tells me: call Enrico, who in turns tells me: “But we have never sent money around!”. Me: “That’s true!”. A view into an unknown world opens up. The story starts like that and still doesn’t stop. Two trips to Italy by John, two containers in Sierra Leone, a school with four hundred and more kids in a beautiful place where you wouldn’t go for anything in the world, a trip by some of us to Sierra Leone, friends forever. That’s it.

The moral is: always respond hastily to Oxford academics and even to homelesses outside the supermarket, something will happen...

Marco Sermarini
President of Società Chestertoniana italiana

FRIENDS' HOUSES



Italy, Emilia-Romagna region
Google Earth, 2023



100 km

*“It is not by dint of scruples that a man will
become great. Greatness comes, God willing,
as a fine day.”*

Albert Camus

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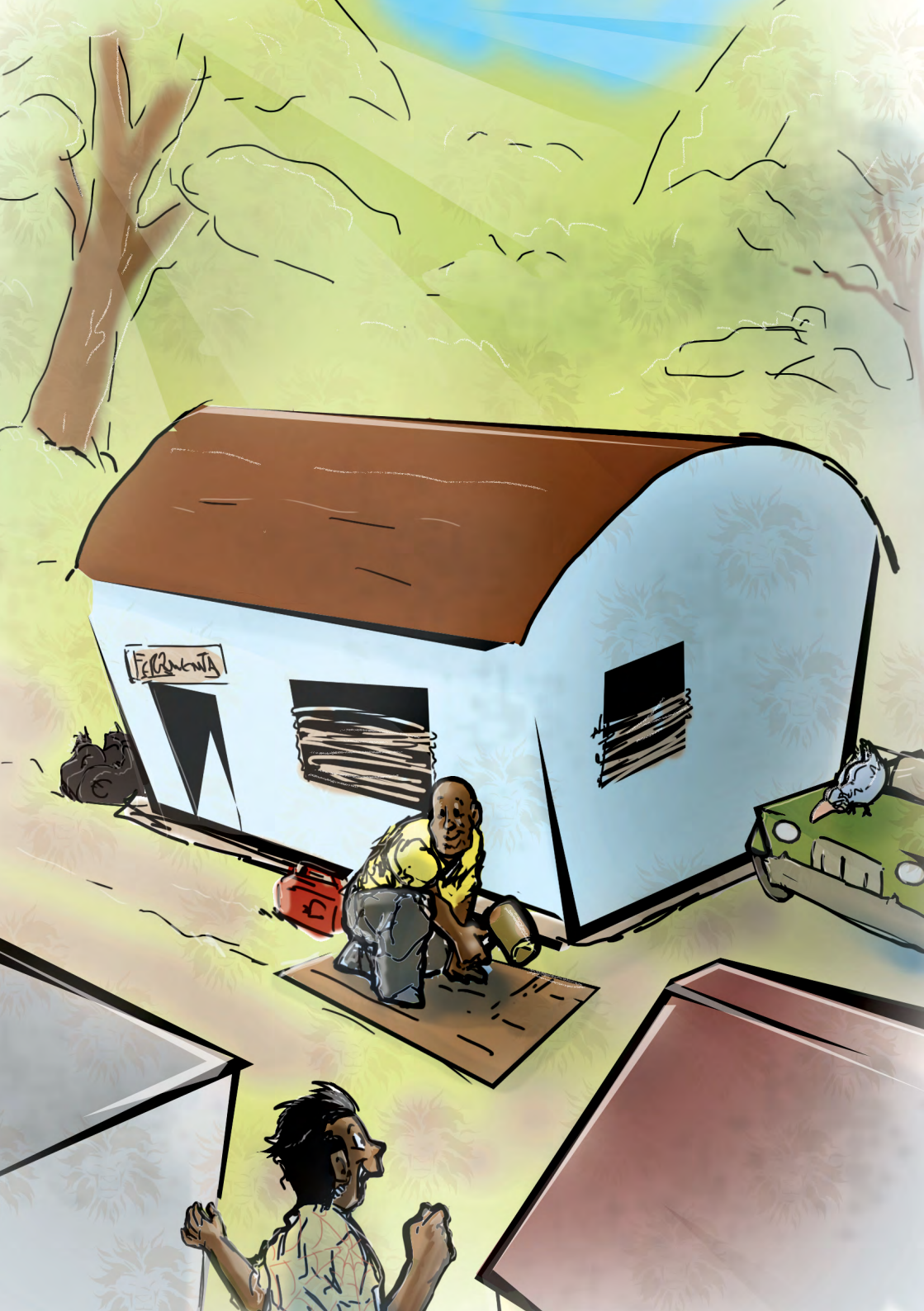
John

The sun illuminates the dry steppes of this part of the world.

I wouldn't live anywhere else: beyond every river that flows through this valley, mountains, suns and again mountains rise above, women and children head there to collect water and face a new day, together. Men lifts heavy loads, release bovines that graze on the enormous mountains of Sierra Leone.

At night, the starlight is enough to see everything, even the small animals that move silently in the branches of the tree. Quiet voices of animals, of chickens, of dogs, even of oxen, distant bells, rustic effusions: sounds and smells come from everywhere and make the heart rest.

I've always lived here and I bear the name of my father, my father's father and so on, to the ends of time: my name in John. I work in a small hardware which overlooks one of the main roads and I try, with not a few difficulties, to carry on my father's job. Life in this land clears up between great poverty



and the desire of redemption, and when the sun slowly sets and disappears into the river, I see men and women gathering in their homes, people given in by hunger and poverty but they still live. It's difficult to detach one's heart from this place, we are all united by something I cannot explain, something that goes beyond being born here, something that Heaven gives us in boundless joy, in a strong excitement of love for life and man.

It's an ordinary day when Peter, a labourer who works at the Farm just across the river, appears in the doorway of my shop.

"John, John... Father Maximilian is looking for you..."

He introduces himself, without too many pleasantries, a short little man with a nice profile and an oval hat, his eyes like coffee beans. Father Maximilian and I have been friends since he was sent to Sierra Leone, more than a year ago, to look after St. Joseph parish, a few blocks from my shop. A sincere, hardworking person, a big heart.

"Father, which other doors should I fix for you?", I asked him smiling and by then moving towards the exit.

"No doors, just this letter to open" replied the pleased little priest.

It was a dirty with mud letter, half torn. I opened it and I read words that I didn't immediately understand:

*"Fund intended for St. Joseph's parish to support
the youth of the village."*

"Father, I don't understand... what does this mean?", I asked more at the mercy of tiredness from a day's work than the misunderstanding of the moment.

“It has something to do with you, my dear friend. This is the bequest from a dear aunt of mine, she sent me some money to give the parish. A part will be yours: I know your good heart and what binds you to this people and this land. You will be able to do much more for yourself and for them, by studying”.

“Wait, father, the sun has gone to your head! Where would I go to study? Who would take care of the hardware and the squeaky doors in your parish?”

“Dear John, as much as I love you, know that you aren’t irreplaceable. There are plenty of willing boys that could take care of the hardware, but no one has a head like yours. To really love someone, you have to learn to love yourself as much as God loves you. I have to value this generous bequest and the first thing is allowing a flower to sprout. I have already booked your flight to London, learn from me the virtue of foresight”.

“And modesty...” I replied looking down.

“Listen, John, I can’t let a “life” enthusiast like you, not be given a chance to study. Take this scholarship without making a fuss and fly to England. There you’ll find a dear friend of mine, Professor Caldecott, don’t forget this name”.

I looked at him. I looked at his small eyes that I would have said were full of tears, if it hadn’t been for the speed he used to leave the shop.

I spent the evening with Bernard, my dear friend since childhood, since he had decided to look after me, after my father’s death. We were perched on the strong branch of a tree and we were scanning the sky. All the while I was telling him what had happened a few hours before, he had remained silent. I, for my part, watched that wrinkled, witty face, which



suddenly turned towards the stars, to tell me just one thing: “John, look at yourself. You can’t take your eyes off the sky since I have known you. I think you need to give yourself that chance and see where it leads you”.

Brief England’s story

And so, the adventure began: England is a unique, unrepeatable country and wishes to remain so. It is a place that loves to look in the mirror and declares aloud “*God save the Queen!*”; capable to a sentiment that makes patriotism strong even in moments of utmost discouragement. I learnt a lot during those years, but the most incredible thing was my relationship with Professor Caldecott. He tried so hard on my behalf that he always managed to interrogate me, personally and against all rules.

I attended Economic Department: I study a lot and with great stubbornness, I only took a few breaks, had a few beers in the evening with friends, but most of my time was spent in the Library, a unique and privileged place.

The best moments were the ones I spent at Professor’s: five o’clock tea awaited me on Saturday afternoons, when, by then, the majority of people was moving away from the city. His house overlooked a garden full of roses, irremediably invaded by a strong and delicate perfume: he was very keen on having me sit on the veranda, a dreamy place from which we could feel

ourselves masters of that part of the British world, so looked after and loved.

“John, how is the Chesterton monograph coming along?” he asked me suddenly one afternoon.

“I’ve almost learned everything about his thought, Professor. In particular, I can’t stop thinking about one thing”.

“And that is?”

“Distributism. It is the greatest thing I have ever read and studied. The problem is not to steal from the rich to give to the poor, Chesterton said, but to be able to create legislations where small businesses and family actives can survive in the circuit of modern economy. Africa is a Country that more than others can count on the family, for any African it has immense value, and if we give these people the opportunity to create small family run businesses, we give them a reason to live. And to stay”.

“Professor, this man is a genius! This is the first time that I’ve heard about this issues in such a true way! We could help our friends in Sierra Leone to develop professional skills, with which they could then set up small businesses. I don’t know if we will defeat poverty, but that’s not the point! The point is that I can look my friends in the face and ask them to get involved, trying to do what they can do, even the simplest things... let’s start with those!”

In the narcotizing chorus of cicadas, a few sounds not far away stood out in isolation; the professor was staring at me like someone looks at a cat caught in a bag. And he began to laugh.

“You know, John, I’ve never had any doubts about you. I have watched you over the years and I think that bequest has been

a blessing, for you and for all of us. It seems to me evident that our friend Chesterton is working from heaven, even now!” , the smoke from his pipe hit me.

“The Oxford University will offer you a job here in England, it will offer you the citizenship and you can live here forever, with your family. I might start calling you Mr John” -he told laughing. “However, I by now see in your gaze the furtive shadows of the people you love”.

He scrutinize me with his big, certain, powerful, light-blue eyes, that had lost hope of imposing anything on me since long ago.

“I’ll know you’ll think about it” he sighed, pausing for effect and he stood up, recomposing his majestic figure that I would follow anywhere.

It is incredible, looking back on it today, that it was those moments with him that made me return to Sierra Leone. That warm and comfortable furniture, that true and forward-looking friendship, that dignified, almost noble surrender to what he could not change, and the irreproachable tenacity of one who pursues the truth.

It was these and many other things that united us in the sacred bond of friendship, which by now at that moment seemed immense to me, but I had no idea how great it would become.



My Sierra Forever

I decided to return.

With sorrow I said goodbye to Professor, his tapered, tired hands that had done so much for me. I went back to Sierra Leone for him too: I did so because what I had discovered, I couldn't keep it for myself, I couldn't let it remain a theory I studied or something to dream about sometimes, with lowered eyelids. I could have at least given it a try.

Several months passed, and I soon realised that the Chesterton Center, the cooperative that had been set up shortly after my return, thanks to the help of many friends, was growing rapidly and needed support that I was unable to find on my own. It was a small family run cooperative which, over months, had expanded and involved more and more people.

I launched request for help on every platform, so that I could reach the *Chesterton Centres* around the world, in the hope that they would take up my appeal. One day, as I watched the comings and goings of my workers under a stubborn sun, I received an unexpected message from Italy.



Dear John,

your appeal has arrived here, in San Benedetto del Tronto. Between us, friends of Chesterton and of others Italian “Confraternita”, there was a discussion to see what was the best help we could offer you.

I won't deny you that the first things that came to mind were material aid: a tractor, money, later generation excavators... You know how it is, I don't live in Sierra Leone (and thanks heavens for that!), but I have been reading up and, apparently, either you go into farming or you don't bring home much.

Anyway, a conversation with a dear friend from Ferrara has opened up a new avenue for me.

Come and see us John, get to know us, stay with us, tell us about your land and you. We have in fact already raised a fair amount of money (it was meant to be used to get you a nice tractor!), but now we thought it might cover your travel expenses to come here to us. Think about it.

I am happy you came into my life and... we have a friend in common, here on Earth as well as in Heaven, it is thanks to him that I know your story.

With affection,

Marco.



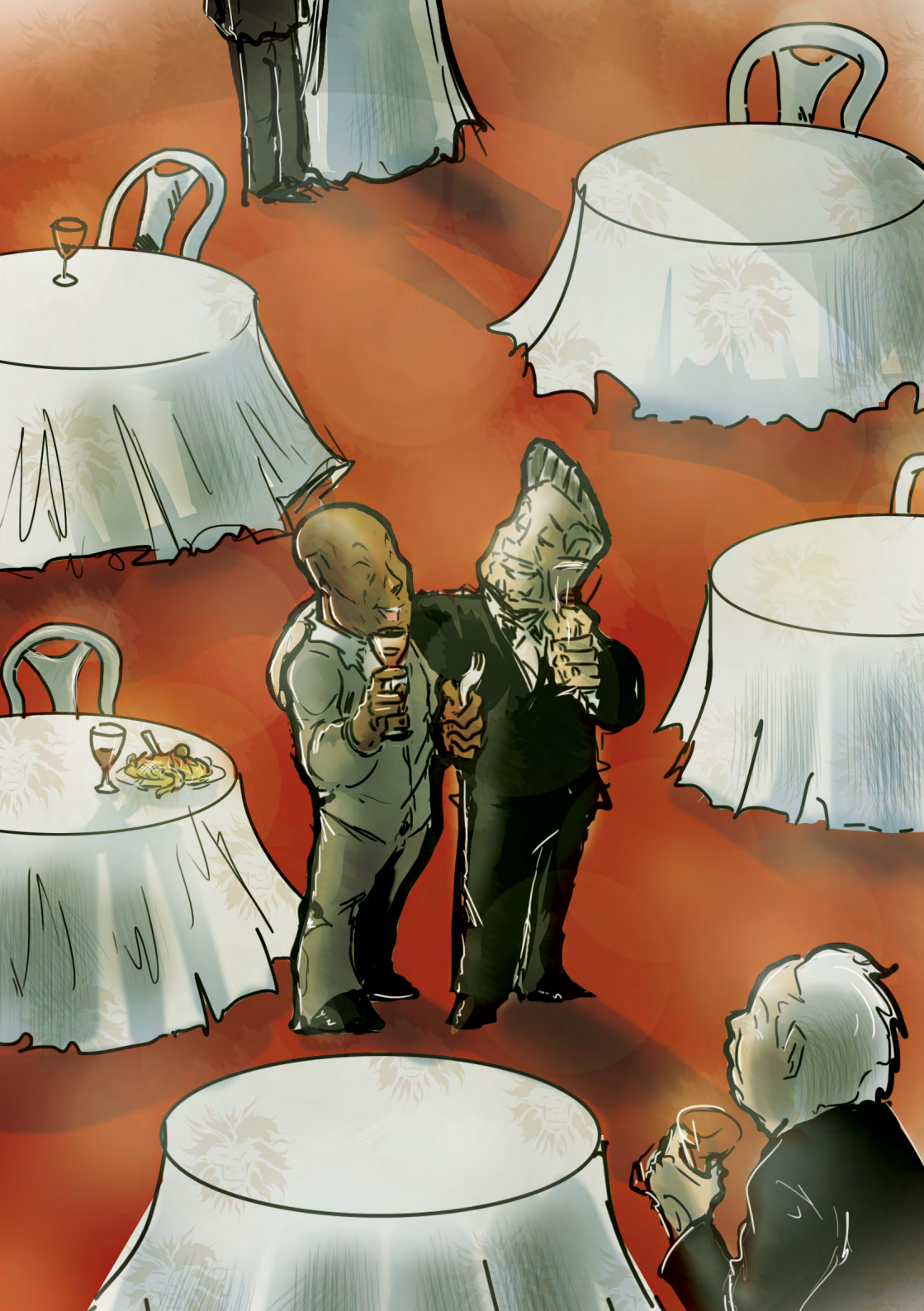
Then I learnt that Professor Caldecott had got in touch with Marco to tell him about me and what we were building in Sierra Leone, and I did not hesitate for a second in deciding to go to Italy: it was like following the mysterious plot of encounters and connections that were once again invading my life.

So it was that I made the second decisive trip.

I met friends from San Benedetto del Tronto and, thanks to my meeting with them, I was also invited to Ferrara: in all these places I always felt at home; I could almost still perceive the smell of the African land, so much so that these people were so agreeable and dear to me. I was among these new friends who like to call themselves “Confraternita”, I could see projects taking shape, I could see what tentatively had been born in Sierra Leone.

Yet there was one factor I had not yet fully considered, but which united them all in an inexplicable way.

There is one thing that is worth more than money, than a tractor, than a handful of extra land to cultivate. It is a friendship capable of making you grow: being with them made me see more closely that education fulfills, realises, completes. Over the years I realised that the development of Africa is not just a question of electricity, roads, infrastructure. All this is needed, but development is primarily a matter of people. Our work is about changing mentalities and this is done through education. Then it becomes that flash inside you that nobody can take away from you. Education enriches you with a treasure that no thief can ever steal from you.



I am more than certain that, without this journey, I would never have understood so deeply that no one is willing to change for the sake of a simple theory. He can only do that if he realises he is wanted, preferred, loved by someone else.

My last day in Italy was marked by a party in the hills of Marche and, as I was saying goodbye to everyone and then retiring to sleep for a few hours (I would have had to catch a plane in the middle of the night!), I approached Marco and told him: “I had never thought that the best help for me and my land would be to be your friends, forever”.

A proud and unequalled smile appeared on that face so friendly and full of warmth: “Now you know that to ask a Sierra Leonean –is that how you say it?- to ask him, I said, to plow the land, you will first have to spend an evening stargazing with him”.

“What if that Sierra Leonian I ask to plow is you?” I said hiding an ineffable hope.

“We will never leave each other again, dear John. If you invite me, I’ll also come to that remote place where you live. I admit that the mere thought of plowing the land makes my blood run cold... However, if you were then to offer me a hot meal and a good drink, I might think about it”.

We both laughed, for a time that seemed endless.



SIERRA LEONE
CHESTERTON CENTER

THE STEPS TOWARDS PEACE

1 An unexpected way

“It was a dirty with mud letter, half torn. I opened it and I read words that I didn’t immediately understand:

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to support the youth of the village.”*

“Father, I don’t understand... what does this mean?”, I asked more at the mercy of tiredness from a day’s work than the misunderstanding of the moment.

“It has something to do with you, my dear friend. This is the bequest from a dear aunt of mine, she sent me some money to give the parish. A part will be yours: I know your good heart and what binds you to this people and this land. You will be able to do much more for yourself and for them, by studying”.





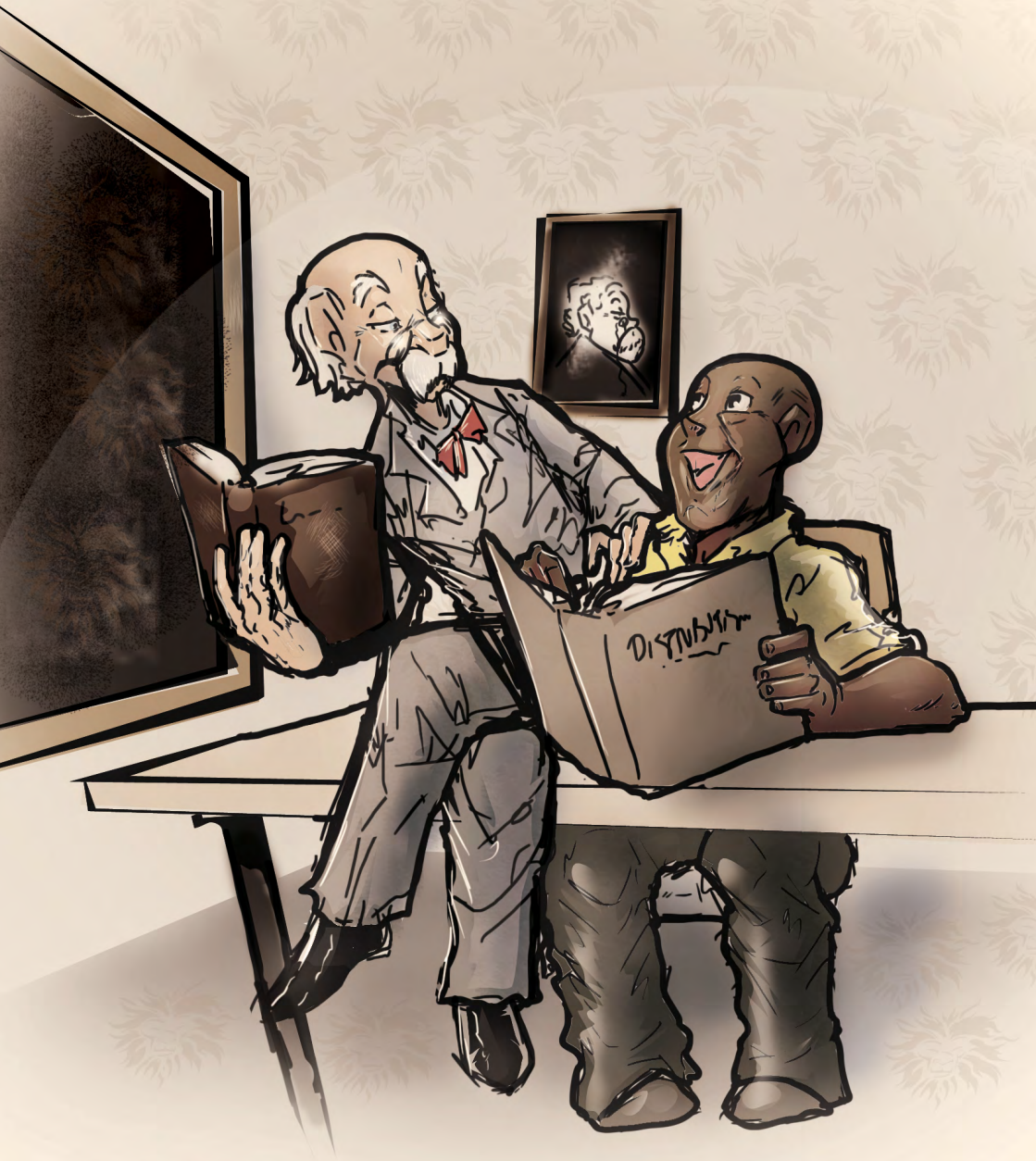
2

A friendship opening you up to reality

“I learnt a lot during those years, but the most incredible thing was my relationship with Professor Caldecott. [...]

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3

A treasure to share

“With sorrow I said goodbye to Professor, his tapered, tired hands that had done so much for me. I went back to Sierra Leone for him too: I did so because what I had discovered, I couldn’t keep it for myself, I couldn’t let it remain a theory I studied or something to dream about sometimes, with lowered eyelids. I should have at least given it a try. [...]

No one is willing to change for the sake of a simple theory. He can only do that if he realises he is wanted, preferred, loved by someone else. [...]

“I had never thought that the best help for me and my land would be to be your friends, forever”.



CATERINA MAGGI

AUTHOR

Caterina Maggi was born in 1984, she is graduated in Linguistics at the University of Bologna and now lives and works in Ferrara. For several years she worked as an educator at the Fondazione Enrico Zanotti, dealing with minors and cultural paths; for the last five years she has been teaching Literature in a middle school in Ferrara. Always passionate about writing, in 2018 she published her promo short story “Per un'altra strada” published by *La Vela*.

Giovanni CAVICCHI

CARTOONIST AND ILLUSTRATOR

The images accompanying the story are the work of Giovanni Cavicchi, a young cartoonist from Ferrara who likes to put his talent at the service of educational and cultural activities.

While at primary school, Giovanni was fascinated by the drawings of a friend and decided to set to work, initially self-taught, then studying advertising graphics and finally attending the International School of Comics in Padua.

A skillful character designer, he has produced several illustrations for the *Gruppo del Tasso*, illustrated Silvana Minia's book '*Su e giù per la Storia*', collaborated with several school institutes in Ferrara and is also carrying out personal projects in parallel, from the script to the finished project.

Since 2021, he has been working with *Santa Caterina da Siena ETS* and its associates, giving contours and colours to educational proposals for minors, literary exhibitions and small publications to be donated to those we meet. Giovanni observes reality with a keen eye, speaks little with words but knows how to sing with his drawings.

Afterword

LIBRETTI DA VISITA: SO THAT FRIENDSHIP HAS NO END

The series of illustrated short stories 'An Inexhaustible Friendship - The Forces that change history are the same as those that change the Heart of a Man' stems from the living relationships that St Catherine of Siena ETS and its associates have forged and nurtured over the years. In these pages, writers and illustrators have portrayed the testimonies of six communities from complex and/or conflicting contexts to tell what allows them to live positively even where it would not seem possible, and to discover that the forces that change the Heart of a Man are the same ones that also change history...

We like to call these publications 'libretti da visita', images and fictional stories freely drawn from real friendships, stories of friends of friends, friends not to be missed.

But what is the small contribution each of us can make to build Peace? We have discovered that preserving relationships and relations is a real business: friendships met 'by chance' but which determine our history, friendships that do not leave us alone, friendships that force us to come to terms with our human stature, in a work that becomes an adventure and a responsibility to commit to ourselves every day, because the one who tells us 'Be with me' is the Only One capable of this inexhaustible fidelity.

¹ In Italian, intended as booklets used in a way that a meeting becomes an opportunity, an opportunity to see each other again and forge a long-lasting relationship.



UN'AMICIZIA INESAURIBILE

LE RIZZE CHE CAMBIANO LA STORIA SONO LE STESSA CHE CAMBIANO IL CORNIO DELL'OPRA

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PER I POPOLI BELLA TERRA ED ENTA



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original title:

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Storia di un'amicizia inesauribile tra Emilia-Romagna e Sierra Leone



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of an inexhaustible friendship...



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