

Chapter 2 - A Breakfast for Love

After Bratti had joined the knot of talkers, the young stranger, hopeless of learning what was the cause of the general agitation, and not much caring to know what was probably of little interest to any but born Florentines, soon became tired of waiting for Bratti's escort; and chose to stroll round the piazza, looking out for some vendor of eatables who might happen to have less than the average curiosity about public news. But as if at the suggestion of a sudden thought, he thrust his hand into a purse or wallet that hung at his waist, and explored it again and again with a look of frustration.

'Not an obolus, by Jupiter!' he murmured, in a language which was not Tuscan or even Italian. 'I thought I had one poor piece left. I must get my breakfast for love, then!'

He had not gone many steps farther before it seemed likely that he had found a quarter of the market where that medium of exchange might not be rejected.

In a corner, away from any group of talkers, two mules were standing, well adorned with red tassels and collars. One of them carried wooden milk-vessels, the other a pair of panniers filled with herbs and salads. Resting her elbow on the neck of the mule that carried the milk, there leaned a young girl, apparently not more than sixteen, with a red hood surrounding her face, which was all the more baby-like in its prettiness from the entire concealment of her hair. The poor child, perhaps, was weary after her labour in the morning twilight in preparation for her walk to market from some castello three or four miles off, for she seemed to have gone to sleep in that half-standing, half-leaning posture. Nevertheless, our stranger had no compunction in awaking her; but the means he chose were so gentle, that it seemed to the damsel in her dream as if a little sprig of thyme had touched her lips while she was stooping to gather the herbs. The dream was broken, however, for she opened her blue baby-eyes, and started up with astonishment and confusion to see the young stranger standing close before her. She heard him speaking to her in a voice which seemed so strange and soft, that even if she had been more collected she would have taken it for granted that he said something hopelessly unintelligible to her, and her first movement was to turn her head a little away, and lift up a corner of her green serge mantle as a screen. He repeated his words -

'Forgive me, pretty one, for awaking you. I'm dying with hunger, and the scent of milk makes breakfast seem more desirable than ever.'

He had chosen the words 'muoio di fame,' because he knew they would be familiar to her ears; and he had uttered them playfully, with

the intonation of a mendicant. This time he was understood; the corner of the mantle was dropped, and in a few moments a large cup of fragrant milk was held out to him. He paid no further compliments before raising it to his lips, and while he was drinking, the little maiden found courage to look up at the long dark curls of this singular-voiced stranger, who had asked for food in the tones of a beggar, but who, though his clothes were much damaged, was unlike any beggar she had ever seen.

While this process of survey was going on, there was another current of feeling that carried her hand into a bag which hung by the side of the mule, and when the stranger set down his cup, he saw a large piece of bread held out towards him, and caught a glance of the blue eyes that seemed intended as an encouragement to him to take this additional gift.

'But perhaps that is your own breakfast,' he said. 'No, I have had enough without payment. A thousand thanks, my gentle one.'

There was no rejoinder in words; but the piece of bread was pushed a little nearer to him, as if in impatience at his refusal; and as the long dark eyes of the stranger rested on the baby-face, it seemed to be gathering more and more courage to look up and meet them.

'Ah, then, if I must take the bread,' he said, laying his hand on it, 'I shall get bolder still, and beg for another kiss to make the bread sweeter.'

His speech was getting wonderfully intelligible in spite of the strange voice, which had at first almost seemed a thing to make her cross herself. She blushed deeply, and lifted up a corner of her mantle to her mouth again. But just as the too presumptuous stranger was leaning forward, and had his fingers on the arm that held up the screening mantle, he was startled by a harsh voice close upon his ear.

'Who are you - with a murrain to you? No honest buyer. I'll warrant, but a hanger-on of the dicers - or something worse. Go! dance off, and find fitter company, or I'll give you a tune to a little quicker time than you'll like.'

The young stranger drew back and looked at the speaker with a glance provokingly free from alarm and deprecation and his slight expression of saucy amusement broke into a broad beaming smile as he surveyed the figure of his threatener. She was a stout but brawny woman, with a man's jerkin slipped over her green serge gamurra or gown, and the peaked hood of some departed mantle fastened round her sun-burnt face, which, under all its coarseness and premature wrinkles, showed a half-sad, half-ludicrous maternal resemblance to the tender baby-

face of the little maiden - the sort of resemblance which often seems a more croaking shudder-creating prophecy than that of the death's-head.

There was something irresistibly propitiating in that bright young smile, but Monna Ghita was not a woman to betray any weakness, and she went on speaking, apparently with heightened exasperation.

'Yes, yes, you can grin as well as other monkeys in cap and jerkin. You're a minstrel or a mountebank, I'll be sworn; you look for all the world as silly as a tumbler when he's been upside down and has got on his heels again. And what fool's tricks hast thou been after, Tessa?' she added, turning to her daughter, whose frightened face was more inviting to abuse. 'Giving away the milk and victuals, it seems; ay, ay, thoud'st carry water in thy cars for any idle vagabond that didn't like to stoop for it, thou silly staring rabbit! Turn thy back, and lift the herbs out of the panniers, else I'll make thee say a few Aves without counting.'

'Nay, Madonna,' said the stranger, with a pleading smile, 'don't be angry with your pretty Tessa for taking pity on a hungry traveller, who found himself unexpectedly without a quattrino. Your handsome face looks so well when it frowns, that I long to see it illuminated by a smile.'

'Va via! I know what paste you are made of. You may tickle me with that straw a good long while before I shall laugh, I can tell you. Get along, with a bad Easter! else I'll make a beauty spot or two on that face of yours that shall spoil your kissing on this side Advent.'

As Monna Ghita lifted her formidable talons by way of complying with the first and last requisite of eloquence, Bratti, who had come up a minute or two before, had been saying to his companion, 'What think you of this pretty parrot, Nello? Doesn't his tongue smack of Venice?'

'Nay, Bratti,' said the barber in an undertone, 'thy wisdom has much of the ass in it, as I told thee just now; especially about the ears. This stranger is a Greek, else I'm not the barber who has had the sole and exclusive shaving of the excellent Demetrio, and drawn more than one sorry tooth from his learned jaw. And this youth might be taken to have come straight from Olympus - at least when he has had a touch of my razor.'

'Orsu! Monna Ghita!' continued Nello, not sorry to see some sport; 'what has happened to cause such a thunderstorm? Has this young stranger been misbehaving himself?'

'By San Giovanni!' said the cautious Bratti, who had not shaken off his original suspicions concerning the shabbily-clad possessor of jewels, 'he did right to run away from me, if he meant to get into mischief. I can swear I found him under the Loggia de' Cerchi, with a ring on his finger such as I've seen worn by Bernardo Rucellai himself. Not another rusty nail's worth do I know about him.'

'The fact is,' said Nello, eyeing the stranger good-humouredly, 'this bello giovane has been a little too presumptuous in admiring the charms of Monna Ghita, and has attempted to kiss her while her daughter's back is turned; for I observe that the pretty Tessa is too busy to look this way at present. Was it not so, Messer?' Nello concluded, in a tone of courtesy.

'You have divined the offence like a soothsayer,' said the stranger, laughingly. 'Only that I had not the good fortune to find Monna Ghita here at first. I begged a cup of milk from her daughter, and had accepted this gift of bread, for which I was making a humble offering of gratitude, before I had the higher pleasure of being face to face with these riper charms which I was perhaps too bold in admiring.'

'Va, va! be off, every one of you, and stay in purgatory till I pay to get you out, will you?' said Monna Ghita, fiercely, elbowing Nello, and leading forward her mule so as to compel the stranger to jump aside. 'Tessa, thou simpleton, bring forward thy mule a bit: the cart will be upon us.'

As Tessa turned to take the mule's bridle, she cast one timid glance at the stranger, who was now moving with Nello out of the way of an approaching market-cart; and the glance was just long enough to seize the beckoning movement of his hand, which indicated that he had been watching for this opportunity of an adieu.

'Ebbene,' said Bratti, raising his voice to speak across the cart; 'I leave you with Nello, young man, for there's no pushing my bag and basket any farther, and I have business at home. But you'll remember our bargain, because if you found Tessa without me, it was not my fault. Nello will show you my shop in the Ferravecchi, and I'll not turn my back on you.'

'A thousand thanks, friend!' said the stranger, laughing, and then turned away with Nello up the narrow street which led most directly to the Piazza del Duomo.