

## Chapter 10 - Under the Plane-Tree

On the day of San Giovanni it was already three weeks ago that Tito had handed his florins to Cennini, and we have seen that as he set out towards the Via de' Bardi he showed all the outward signs of a mind at ease. How should it be otherwise? He never jarred with what was immediately around him, and his nature was too joyous, too unapprehensive, for the hidden and the distant to grasp him in the shape of a dread. As he turned out of the hot sunshine into the shelter of a narrow street, took off the black cloth berretta, or simple cap with upturned lappet, which just crowned his brown curls, pushing his hair and tossing his head backward to court the cooler air, there was no brand of duplicity on his brow; neither was there any stamp of candour: it was simply a finely-formed, square, smooth young brow. And the slow absent glance he cast around at the upper windows of the houses had neither more dissimulation in it, nor more ingenuousness, than belongs to a youthful well-opened eyelid with its unwearied breadth of gaze; to perfectly pellucid lenses; to the undimmed dark of a rich brown iris; and to a pure cerulean-tinted angle of whiteness streaked with the delicate shadows of long eyelashes. Was it that Tito's face attracted or repelled according to the mental attitude of the observer? Was it a cypher with more than one key? The strong, unmistakable expression in his whole air and person was a negative one, and it was perfectly veracious; it declared the absence of any uneasy claim, any restless vanity, and it made the admiration that followed him as he passed among the troop of holiday-makers a thoroughly willing tribute.

For by this time the stir of the Festa was felt even in the narrowest side-streets; the throng which had at one time been concentrated in the lines through which the procession had to pass, was now streaming out in all directions in pursuit of a new object. Such intervals of a Festa are precisely the moments when the vaguely active animal spirits of a crowd are likely to be the most petulant and most ready to sacrifice a stray individual to the greater happiness of the greater number. As Tito entered the neighbourhood of San Martino, he found the throng rather denser; and near the hostelry of the Bertucce, or Baboons, there was evidently some object which was arresting the passengers and forming them into a knot. It needed nothing of great interest to draw aside passengers unfreighted with a purpose, and Tito was preparing to turn aside into an adjoining street, when, amidst the loud laughter, his ear discerned a distressed childish voice crying, 'Loose me! Holy Virgin, help me!' which at once determined him to push his way into the knot of gazers. He had just had time to perceive that the distressed voice came from a young contadina, whose white hood had fallen off in the struggle to get her hands free from the grasp of a man in the parti-coloured dress of a cerretano, or conjuror, who was making laughing attempts to soothe and cajole her, evidently

carrying with him the amused sympathy of the spectators. These, by a persuasive variety of words signifying simpleton, for which the Florentine dialect is rich in equivalents, seemed to be arguing with the contadina against her obstinacy. At the first moment the girl's face was turned away, and he saw only her light-brown hair plaited and fastened with a long silver pin; but in the next, the struggle brought her face opposite Tito's, and he saw the baby features of Tessa, her blue eyes filled with tears, and her under-lip quivering. Tessa, too, saw him, and through the mist of her swelling tears there beamed a sudden hope, like that in the face of a little child, when, held by a stranger against its will, it sees a familiar hand stretched out.

In an instant Tito had pushed his way through the barrier of bystanders, whose curiosity made them ready to turn aside at the sudden interference of this handsome young signor, had grasped Tessa's waist, and had said, 'Loose this child! What right have you to hold her against her will?'

The conjuror - a man with one of those faces in which the angles of the eyes and eyebrows, of the nostrils, mouth, and sharply-defined jaw, all tend upward - showed his small regular teeth in an impish but not ill-natured grin, as he let go Tessa's hands, and stretched out his own backward, shrugging his shoulders, and bending them forward a little in a half-apologetic, half-protesting manner.

'I mean the *ragazza*' no evil in the world, Messere: ask this respectable company. I was only going to show them a few samples of my skill, in which this little damsel might have helped me the better because of her kitten face, which would have assured them of open dealing; and I had promised her a lapful of confetti as a reward. But what then? Messer has doubtless better confetti at hand, and she knows it.'

A general laugh among the bystanders accompanied these last words of the conjuror, raised, probably, by the look of relief and confidence with which Tessa clung to Tito's arm, as he drew it from her waist, and placed her hand within it. She only cared about the laugh as she might have cared about the roar of wild beasts from which she was escaping, not attaching any meaning to it; but Tito, who had no sooner got her on his arm than he foresaw some embarrassment in the situation, hastened to get clear of observers who, having been despoiled of an expected amusement, were sure to re-establish the balance by jests.

'See, see, little one! here is your hood,' said the conjuror, throwing the bit of white drapery over Tessa's head. 'Orsu, bear me no malice; come back to me when Messere can spare you.'

'Ah! Maestro Vaiano, she'll come back presently, as the toad said to the harrow,' called out one of the spectators, seeing how Tessa started and shrank at the action of the conjuror.

Tito pushed his way vigorously towards the corner of a side street, a little vexed at this delay in his progress to the Via de' Bardi, and intending to get rid of the poor little contadina as soon as possible. The next street, too, had its passengers inclined to make holiday remarks on so unusual a pair; but they had no sooner entered it than he said, in a kind but hurried manner, 'Now, little one, where were you going? Are you come by yourself to the Festa?'

'Ah, no!' said Tessa, looking frightened and distressed again; 'I have lost my mother in the crowd - her and my father-in-law. They will be angry - he will beat me. It was in the crowd in San Pulinari - somebody pushed me along and I couldn't stop myself, so I got away from them. Oh, I don't know where they're gone! Please, don't leave me!'

Her eyes had been swelling with tears again, and she ended with a sob.

Tito hurried along again: the Church of the Badia was not far off. They could enter it by the cloister that opened at the back, and in the church he could talk to Tessa - perhaps leave her. No! it was an hour at which the church was not open; but they paused under the shelter of the cloister, and he said, 'Have you no cousin or friend in Florence, my little Tessa, whose house you could find; or are you afraid of walking by yourself since you have been frightened by the conjuror? I am in a hurry to get to Oltrarno, but if I could take you anywhere near -'

'Oh, I am frightened: he was the devil - I know he was. And I don't know where to go. I have nobody: and my mother meant to have her dinner somewhere, and I don't know where. Holy Madonna! I shall be beaten.'

The corners of the pouting mouth went down piteously, and the poor little bosom with the beads on it above the green serge gown heaved so, that there was no longer any help for it: a loud sob would come, and the big tears fell as if they were making up for lost time. Here was a situation! It would have been brutal to leave her, and Tito's nature was all gentleness. He wished at that moment that he had not been expected in the Via de' Bardi. As he saw her lifting up her holiday apron to catch the hurrying tears, he laid his hand, too, on the apron, and rubbed one of the cheeks and kissed the baby-like roundness.

'My poor little Tessa! leave off crying. Let us see what can be done. Where is your home - where do you live?'

There was no answer, but the sobs began to subside a little and the drops to fall less quickly.

'Come! I'll take you a little way, if you'll tell me where you want to go.'

The apron fell, and Tessa's face began to look as contented as a cherub's budding from a cloud. The diabolical conjuror, the anger and the beating, seemed a long way off.

'I think I'll go home, if you'll take me,' she said, in a half whisper, looking up at Tito with wide blue eyes, and with something sweeter than a smile - with a childlike calm.

'Come, then, little one,' said Tito, in a caressing tone, putting her arm within his again. 'Which way is it?'

'Beyond Peretola - where the large pear-tree is.'

'Peretola? Out of which gate, pazzarella? I am a stranger, you must remember.'

'Out at the Por del Prato,' said Tessa, moving along with a very fast hold on Tito's arm.

He did not know all the turnings well enough to venture on an attempt at choosing the quietest streets; and besides, it occurred to him that where the passengers were most numerous there was, perhaps, the most chance of meeting with Monna Ghita and finding an end to his knight-errantry. So he made straight for Porta Rossa, and on to Ognissanti, showing his usual bright propitiatory face to the mixed observers who threw their jests at him and his little heavy-shod maiden with much liberality. Mingled with the more decent holiday-makers there were frolicsome apprentices, rather envious of his good fortune; bold-eyed women with the badge of the yellow veil; beggars who thrust forward their caps for alms, in derision at Tito's evident haste; dicers, sharpers, and loungers of the worst sort; boys whose tongues were used to wag in concert at the most brutal street games: for the streets of Florence were not always a moral spectacle in those times, and Tessa's terror at being lost in the crowd was not wholly unreasonable.

When they reached the Piazza d'Ognissanti, Tito slackened his pace: they were both heated with their hurried walk, and here was a wider space where they could take breath. They sat down on one of the

stone benches which were frequent against the walls of old Florentine houses.

'Holy Virgin' said Tessa; 'I am glad we have got away from those women and boys; but I was not frightened, because you could take care of me.'

'Pretty little Tessa!' said Tito, smiling at her. 'What makes you feel so safe with me?'

'Because you are so beautiful - like the people going into Paradise: they are all good.'

'It is a long while since you had your breakfast, Tessa,' said Tito, seeing some stalls near, with fruit and sweetmeats upon them. 'Are you hungry?'

'Yes, I think I am - if you will have some too.'

Tito bought some apricots, and cakes, and comfits, and put them into her apron.

'Come,' he said, 'let us walk on to the Prato, and then perhaps you will not be afraid to go the rest of the way alone.'

'But you will have some of the apricots and things,' said Tessa, rising obediently and gathering up her apron as a bag for her store.

'We will see,' said Tito aloud; and to himself he said, 'Here is a little contadina who might inspire a better idyl than Lorenzo de' Medici's 'Nencia da Barberino,' that Nello's friends rave about; if I were only a Theocritus, or had time to cultivate the necessary experience by unseasonable walks of this sort! However, the mischief is done now: I am so late already that another half-hour will make no difference. Pretty little pigeon!'

'We have a garden and plenty of pears,' said Tessa, 'and two cows, besides the mules; and I'm very fond of them. But my father-in-law is a cross man: I wish my mother had not married him. I think he is wicked; he is very ugly.'

'And does your mother let him beat you, poverina? You said you were afraid of being beaten.'

'Ah, my mother herself scolds me: she loves my young sister better, and thinks I don't do work enough. Nobody speaks kindly to me, only the Pievano (parish priest) when I go to confession. And the men in the Mercato laugh at me and make fun of me. Nobody ever kissed me and

spoke to me as you do; just as I talk to my little black-faced kid, because I'm very fond of it.'

It seemed not to have entered Tessa's mind that there was any change in Tito's appearance since the morning he begged the milk from her, and that he looked now like a personage for whom she must summon her little stock of reverent words and signs. He had impressed her too differently from any human being who had ever come near her before, for her to make any comparison of details; she took no note of his dress; he was simply a voice and a face to her, something come from Paradise into a world where most things seemed hard and angry; and she prattled with as little restraint as if he had been an imaginary companion born of her own lovingness and the sunshine.

They had now reached the Prato, which at that time was a large open space within the walls, where the Florentine youth played at their favourite Calcio - a peculiar kind of football - and otherwise exercised themselves. At this midday time it was forsaken and quiet to the very gates, where a tent had been erected in preparation for the race. On the border of this wide meadow, Tito paused and said -

'Now, Tessa, you will not be frightened if I leave you to walk the rest of the way by yourself. Addio! Shall I come and buy a cup of milk from you in the Mercato to-morrow morning, to see that you are quite safe?'

He added this question in a soothing tone, as he saw her eyes widening sorrowfully, and the corners of her mouth falling. She said nothing at first; she only opened her apron and looked down at her apricots and sweetmeats. Then she looked up at him again and said complainingly -

'I thought you would have some, and we could sit down under a tree outside the gate, and eat them together.'

'Tessa, Tessa, you little siren, you would ruin me,' said Tito, laughing, and kissing both her cheeks. 'I ought to have been in the Via de' Bardi long ago. No! I must go back now; you are in no danger. There - I'll take an apricot. Addio!'

He had already stepped two yards from her when he said the last word. Tessa could not have spoken; she was pale, and a great sob was rising; but she turned round as if she felt there was no hope for her, and stepped on, holding her apron so forgetfully that the apricots began to roll out on the grass.

Tito could not help looking after her, and seeing her shoulders rise to the bursting sob, and the apricots fall - could not help going after her

and picking them up. It was very hard upon him: he was a long way off the Via de' Bardi, and very near to Tessa.

'See, my silly one,' he said, picking up the apricots. 'Come, leave off crying, I will go with you, and we'll sit down under the tree. Come, I don't like to see you cry; but you know I must go back some time.'

So it came to pass that they found a great plane-tree not far outside the gates, and they sat down under it, and all the feast was spread out on Tessa's lap, she leaning her back against the trunk of the tree, and he stretched opposite to her, resting his elbows on the rough green growth cherished by the shade, while the sunlight stole through the boughs and played about them like a winged thing. Tessa's face was all contentment again, and the taste of the apricots and sweetmeats seemed very good.

'You pretty bird!' said Tito, looking at her as she sat eyeing the remains of the feast with an evident mental debate about saving them, since he had said he would not have any more. 'To think of any one scolding you! What sins do you tell of at confession, Tessa?'

'Oh, a great many. I am often naughty. I don't like work and I can't help being idle, though I know I shall be beaten and scolded; and I give the mules the best fodder when nobody sees me, and then when the Madre is angry I say I didn't do it, and that makes me frightened at the devil. I think the conjuror was the devil. I am not so frightened after I've been to confession. And see, I've got a Breve here that a good father, who came to Prato, preaching this Easter, blessed and gave us all.' Here Tessa drew from her bosom a tiny bag carefully fastened up. 'And I think the holy Madonna will take care of me; she looks as if she would, and perhaps if I wasn't idle, she wouldn't let me be beaten.'

'If they are so cruel to you, Tessa, shouldn't you like to leave them, and go and live with a beautiful lady who would be kind to you, if she would have you to wait upon her?'

Tessa seemed to hold her breath for a moment or two. Then she said doubtfully, 'I don't know.'

'Then should you like to be my little servant, and live with me?' said Tito, smiling. He meant no more than to see what sort of pretty look and answer she would give.

There was a flush of joy immediately. 'Will you take me with you now? Ah! I shouldn't go home and be beaten then.' She paused a little while, and then added more doubtfully, 'But I should like to fetch my black-faced kid.'

'Yes, you must go back to your kid, my Tessa,' said Tito, rising, 'and I must go the other way.'

'By Jupiter!' he added, as he went from under the shade of the tree, 'it is not a pleasant time of day to walk from here to the Via de' Bardi; I am more inclined to lie down and sleep in this shade.'

It ended so. Tito had an unconquerable aversion to anything unpleasant, even when an object very much loved and desired was on the other side of it. He had risen early; had waited; had seen sights, and had been already walking in the sun: he was inclined for a siesta, and inclined all the more because little Tessa was there, and seemed to make the air softer. He lay down on the grass again, putting his cap under his head on a green tuft by the side of Tessa. That was not quite comfortable; so he moved again, and asked Tessa to let him rest his head against her lap; and in that way he soon fell asleep. Tessa sat quiet as a dove on its nest, just venturing, when he was fast asleep, to touch the wonderful dark curls that fell backward from his ear. She was too happy to go to sleep - too happy to think that Tito would wake up, and that then he would leave her, and she must go home. It takes very little water to make a perfect pool for a tiny fish, where it will find its world and paradise all in one, and never have a presentiment of the dry bank. The fretted summer shade, and stillness, and the gentle breathing of some loved life near - it would be paradise to us all, if eager thought, the strong angel with the implacable brow, had not long since closed the gates.

It really was a long while before the waking came - before the long dark eyes opened at Tessa, first with a little surprise, and then with a smile, which was soon quenched by some preoccupying thought. Tito's deeper sleep had broken into a doze, in which he felt himself in the Via de' Bardi, explaining his failure to appear at the appointed time. The clear images of that doze urged him to start up at once to a sitting posture, and as he stretched his arms and shook his cap, he said -

'Tessa, little one, you have let me sleep too long. My hunger and the shadows together tell me that the sun has done much travel since I fell asleep. I must lose no more time. Addio,' he ended, patting her cheek with one hand, and settling his cap with the other.

She said nothing, but there were signs in her face which made him speak again in as serious and as chiding a tone as he could command

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'Now, Tessa, you must not cry. I shall be angry; I shall not love you if you cry. You must go home to your black-faced kid, or if you like you



may go back to the gate and see the horses start. But I can stay with you no longer, and if you cry, I shall think you are troublesome to me.'

The rising tears were checked by terror at this change in Tito's voice. Tessa turned very pale, and sat in trembling silence, with her blue eyes widened by arrested tears.

'Look now,' Tito went on, soothingly, opening the wallet that hung at his belt, 'here is a pretty charm that I have had a long while - ever since I was in Sicily, a country a long way off.'

His wallet had many little matters in it mingled with small coins, and he had the usual difficulty in laying his finger on the right thing. He unhooked his wallet, and turned out the contents on Tessa's lap. Among them was his onyx ring.

'Ah, my ring!' he exclaimed, slipping it on the forefinger of his right hand. 'I forgot to put it on again this morning. Strange, I never missed it! See, Tessa,' he added, as he spread out the smaller articles, and selected the one he was in search of. 'See this pretty little pointed bit of red coral - like your goat's horn, is it not? - and here is a hole in it, so you can put it on the cord round your neck along with your Breve, and then the evil spirits can't hurt you: if you ever see them coming in the shadow round the corner, point this little coral horn at them, and they will run away. It is a 'buona fortuna,' and will keep you from harm when I am not with you. Come, undo the cord.'

Tessa obeyed with a tranquillising sense that life was going to be something quite new, and that Tito would be with her often. All who remember their childhood remember the strange vague sense, when some new experience came, that everything else was going to be changed, and that there would be no lapse into the old monotony. So the bit of coral was hung beside the tiny bag with the scrap of scrawled parchment in it, and Tessa felt braver.

'And now you will give me a kiss,' said Tito, economising time by speaking while he swept in the contents of the wallet and hung it at his waist-again, 'and look happy, like a good girl, and then -'

But Tessa had obediently put forward her lips in a moment, and kissed his cheek as he hung down his head.

'Oh, you pretty pigeon!' cried Tito, laughing, pressing her round cheeks with his hands and crushing her features together so as to give them a general impartial kiss.

Then he started up and walked away, not looking round till he was ten yards from her, when he just turned and gave a parting beck.

Tessa was looking after him, but he could see she was making no signs of distress. It was enough for Tito if she did not cry while he was present. The softness of his nature required that all sorrow should be hidden away from him.

'I wonder when Romola will kiss my cheek in that way?' thought Tito, as he walked along. It seemed a tiresome distance now, and he almost wished he had not been so softhearted, or so tempted to linger in the shade. No other excuse was needed to Bardo and Romola than saying simply that he had been unexpectedly hindered: he felt confident their proud delicacy would inquire no farther. He lost no time in getting to Ognissanti, and hastily taking some food there, he crossed the Arno by the Ponte alla Carraja, and made his way as directly as possible towards the Via de' Bardi.

But it was the hour when all the world who meant to be in particularly good time to see the Corso were returning from the Borghi, or villages just outside the gates, where they had dined and reposed themselves; and the thoroughfares leading to the bridges were of course the issues towards which the stream of sightseers tended. Just as Tito reached the Ponte Vecchio and the entrance of the Via de' Bardi, he was suddenly urged back towards the angle of the intersecting streets. A company on horseback, coming from the Via Guicciardini, and turning up the Via de' Bardi, had compelled the foot-passengers to recede hurriedly. Tito had been walking, as his manner was, with the thumb of his right hand resting in his belt; and as he was thus forced to pause and was looking carelessly at the passing cavaliers, he felt a very thin cold hand laid on his. He started round, and saw the Dominican friar whose upturned face had so struck him in the morning. Seen closer, the face looked more evidently worn by sickness and not by age; and again it brought some strong but indefinite reminiscences to Tito.

'Pardon me, but - from your face and your ring,' said the friar, in a faint voice, 'is not your name Tito Melema?'

'Yes,' said Tito, also speaking faintly, doubly jarred by the cold touch and the mystery. He was not apprehensive or timid through his imagination, but through his sensations and perceptions he could easily be made to shrink and turn pale like a maiden.

'Then I shall fulfil my commission.'

The friar put his hand under his scapulary, and drawing out a small linen bag which hung round his neck, took from it a bit of parchment, doubled and stuck firmly together with some black adhesive substance, and placed it in Tito's hand. On the outside was written in Italian, in a small but distinct character -

'Tito Melenma, aged twenty-three, with a dark, beautiful face, long dark curls, the brightest smile, and a large onyx ring on his right forefinger.'

Tito did not look at the friar, but tremblingly broke open the bit of parchment. Inside, the words were -

'I am sold for a slave: I think they are going to take me to Antioch. The gems alone will serve to ransom me.'

Tito looked round at the friar, but could only ask a question with his eyes.

'I had it at Corinth,' the friar said, speaking with difficulty, like one whose small strength had been overtaxed - 'I had it from a man who was dying.'

'He is dead, then?' said Tito, with a bounding of the heart.

'Not the writer. The man who gave it me was a pilgrim, like myself, to whom the writer had intrusted it, because he was journeying to Italy.'

'You know the contents?'

'I do not know them, but I conjecture them. Your friend is in slavery: you will go and release him. But I am unable to talk now.' The friar, whose voice had become feebler and feebler, sank down on the stone bench against the wall from which he had risen to touch Tito's hand, adding -

'I am at San Marco; my name is Fra Luca.'