Chapter 33 - Baldassarre Makes an Acquaintance

When Baldassarre was wandering about Florence in search of a spare outhouse where he might have the cheapest of sheltered beds, his steps had been attracted towards that sole portion of ground within the walls of the city which is not perfectly level, and where the spectator, lifted above the roofs of the houses, can see beyond the city to the protecting hills and far-stretching valley, otherwise shut out from his view except along the welcome opening made by the course of the Arno. Part of that ground has been already seen by us as the hill of Bogoli, at that time a great stone-quarry, but the side towards which Baldassarre directed his steps was the one that sloped down behind the Via de' Bardi, and was most commonly called the hill of San Giorgio. Bratti had told him that Tito's dwelling was in the Via de' Bardi; and, after surveying that street, he turned up the slope of the hill which he had observed as he was crossing the bridge. If he could find a sheltering outhouse on that hill, he would be glad: he had now for some years been accustomed to live with a broad sky about him; and, moreover, the narrow passes of the streets, with their strip of sky above, and the unknown labyrinth around them, seemed to intensify his sense of loneliness and feeble memory.

The hill was sparsely inhabited, and covered chiefly by gardens; but in one spot was a piece of rough ground jagged with great stones, which had never been cultivated since a landslip had ruined some houses there towards the end of the thirteenth century. Just above the edge of this broken ground stood a queer little square building, looking like a truncated tower roofed in with fluted tiles, and close by was a small outhouse, apparently built up against a piece of ruined stone wall. Under a large half-dead mulberry-tree that was now sending its last fluttering leaves in at the open doorways, a shrivelled, hardy old woman was untying a goat with two kids, and Baldassarre could see that part of the outbuilding was occupied by live stock; but the door of the other part was open, and it was empty of everything but some tools and straw. It was just the sort of place he wanted. He spoke to the old woman; but it was not till he got close to her and shouted in her ear, that he succeeded in making her understand his want of a lodging, and his readiness to pay for it. At first he could get no answer beyond shakes of the head and the words, 'No - no lodging,' uttered in the muffled tone of the deaf. But, by dint of persistence, he made clear to her that he was a poor stranger from a long way over seas, and could not afford to go to hostelries; that he only wanted to lie on the straw in the outhouse, and would pay her a quattrino or two a-week for that shelter. She still looked at him dubiously, shaking her head and talking low to herself; but presently, as if a new thought occurred to her, she fetched a hatchet from the house, and, showing him a chump that lay half covered with litter in a corner, asked him if he would chop that up for her: if he would, he might lie in the outhouse

for one night. He agreed, and Monna Lisa stood with her arms akimbo to watch him, with a smile of gratified cunning, saying low to herself -

'It's lain there ever since my old man died. What then? I might as well have put a stone on the fire. He chops very well, though he does speak with a foreign tongue, and looks odd. I couldn't have got it done cheaper. And if he only wants a bit of straw to lie on, I might make him do an errand or two up and down the hill. Who need know? And sin that's hidden's half forgiven. He's a stranger: he'll take no notice of her. And I'll tell her to keep her tongue still.'

The antecedent to these feminine pronouns had a pair of blue eyes, which at that moment were applied to a large round hole in the shutter of the upper window. The shutter was closed, not for any penal reasons, but because only the opposite window had the luxury of glass in it: the weather was not warm, and a round hole four inches in diameter served all the purposes of observation. The hole was, unfortunately, a little too high, and obliged the small observer to stand on a low stool of a rickety character; but Tessa would have stood a long while in a much more inconvenient position for the sake of seeing a little variety in her life. She had been drawn to the opening at the first loud tones of the strange voice speaking to Monna Lisa; and darting gently across her room every now and then to peep at something, she continued to stand there until the wood had been chopped, and she saw Baldassarre enter the outhouse, as the dusk was gathering, and seat himself on the straw.

A great temptation had laid hold of Tessa's mind; she would go and take that old man part of her supper, and talk to him a little. He was not deaf like Monna Lisa, and besides she could say a great many things to him that it was no use to shout at Monna Lisa, who knew them already. And he was a stranger - strangers came from a long way off and went away again, and lived nowhere in particular. It was naughty, she knew, for obedience made the largest part in Tessa's idea of duty; but it would be something to confess to the Padre next Pasqua, and there was nothing else to confess except going to sleep sometimes over her beads, and being a little cross with Monna Lisa because she was so deaf; for she had as much idleness as she liked now, and was never frightened into telling white lies. She turned away from her shutter with rather an excited expression in her childish face, which was as pretty and pouting as ever. Her garb was still that of a simple contadina, but of a contadina prepared for a festa: her gown of dark-green serge, with its red girdle, was very clean and neat; she had the string of red glass beads round her neck; and her brown hair, rough from curliness, was duly knotted up, and fastened with the silver pin. She had but one new ornament, and she was very proud of it, for it was a fine gold ring.

Tessa sat on the low stool, nursing her knees, for a minute or two, with her little soul poised in fluttering excitement on the edge of this pleasant transgression. It was quite irresistible. She had been commanded to make no acquaintances, and warned that if she did, all her new happy lot would vanish away, and be like a hidden treasure that turned to lead as soon as it was brought to the daylight; and she had been so obedient that when she had to go to church she had kept her face shaded by her hood and had pursed up her lips quite tightly. It was true her obedience had been a little helped by her own dread lest the alarming stepfather Nofri should turn up even in this quarter, so far from the Por' del Prato, and beat her at least, if he did not drag her back to work for him. But this old man was not an acquaintance; he was a poor stranger going to sleep in the outhouse, and he probably knew nothing of stepfather Nofri; and, besides, if she took him some supper, he would like her, and not want to tell anything about her. Monna Lisa would say she must not go and talk to him, therefore Monna Lisa must not be consulted. It did not signify what she found out after it had been done.

Supper was being prepared, she knew - a mountain of macaroni flavoured with cheese, fragrant enough to tame any stranger. So she tripped down-stairs with a mind full of deep designs, and first asking with an innocent look what that noise of talking had been, without waiting for an answer, knit her brow with a peremptory air, something like a kitten trying to be formidable, and sent the old woman upstairs; saying, she chose to eat her supper down below. In three minutes Tessa with her lantern in one hand and a wooden bowl of macaroni in the other, was kicking gently at the door of the outhouse; and Baldassarre, roused from sad reverie, doubted in the first moment whether he were awake as he opened the door and saw this surprising little handmaid, with delight in her wide eyes, breaking in on his dismal loneliness.

'I've brought you some supper,' she said, lifting her mouth towards his ear and shouting, as if he had been deaf like Monna Lisa. 'Sit down and eat it, while I stay with you.'

Surprise and distrust surmounted every other feeling in Baldassarre, but though he had no smile or word of gratitude ready, there could not be any impulse to push away this visitant, and he sank down passively on his straw again, while Tessa placed herself close to him, put the wooden bowl on his lap, and set down the lantern in front of them, crossing her hands before her, and nodding at the bowl with a significant smile, as much as to say. 'Yes, you may really eat it.' For, in the excitement of carrying out her deed, she had forgotten her previous thought that the stranger would not be deaf, and had fallen into her habitual alternative of dumb show and shouting.

The invitation was not a disagreeable one, for he had been gnawing a remnant of dry bread, which had left plenty of appetite for anything warm and relishing. Tessa watched the disappearance of two or three mouthfuls without speaking, for she had thought his eyes rather fierce at first; but now she ventured to put her mouth to his ear again and cry -

'I like my supper, don't you?'

It was not a smile, but rather the milder look of a dog touched by kindness, but unable to smile, that Baldassarre turned on this round blue-eyed thing that was caring about him.

'Yes,' he said; 'but I can hear well - I'm not deaf.'

'It is true; I forgot,' said Tessa, lifting her hands and clasping them. 'But Monna Lisa is deaf, and I live with her. She's a kind old woman, and I'm not frightened at her. And we live very well: we have plenty of nice things. I can have nuts if I like. And I'm not obliged to work now. I used to have to work, and I didn't like it; but I liked feeding the mules, and I should like to see poor Giannetta, the little mule, again. We've only got a goat and two kids, and I used to talk to the goat a good deal, because there was nobody else but Monna Lisa. But now I've got something else - can you guess what it is?'

She drew her head back, and looked with a challenging smile at Baldassarre, as if she had proposed a difficult riddle to him.

'No,' said he, putting aside his bowl, and looking at her dreamily. It seemed as if this young prattling thing were some memory come back out of his own youth.

'You like me to talk to you, don't you?' said Tessa, 'but you must not tell anybody. Shall I fetch you a bit of cold sausage ?'

He shook his head, but he looked so mild now that Tessa felt quite at her ease.

'Well, then, I've got a little baby. Such a pretty bambinetto, with little fingers and nails! Not old yet; it was born at the Nativita, Monna Lisa says. I was married one Nativita, a long, long while ago, and nobody knew. O Santa Madonna! I didn't mean to tell you that!'

Tessa set up her shoulders and bit her lip, looking at Baldassarre as if this betrayal of secrets must have an exciting effect on him too. But he seemed not to care much; and perhaps that was in the nature of strangers.

'Yes,' she said, carrying on her thought aloud, 'you are a stranger; you don't live anywhere or know anybody, do you?'

'No,' said Baldassarre, also thinking aloud, rather than consciously answering, 'I only know one man.'

'His name is not Nofri, is it?' said Tessa, anxiously.

'No,' said Baldassarre, noticing her look of fear. 'Is that your husband's name?'

That mistaken supposition was very amusing to Tessa. She laughed and clapped her hands as she said -

'No, indeed! But I must not tell you anything about my husband. You would never think what he is - not at all like Nofri!'

She laughed again at the delightful incongruity between the name of Nofri - which was not separable from the idea of the cross-grained stepfather - and the idea of her husband.

'But I don't see him very often,' she went on, more gravely. 'And sometimes I pray to the Holy Madonna to send him oftener, and once she did. But I must go back to my bimbo now. I'll bring it to show you to-morrow. You would like to see it. Sometimes it cries and makes a face, but only when it's hungry, Monna Lisa says. You wouldn't think it, but Monna Lisa had babies once, and they are all dead old men. My husband says she will never die now, because she's so well dried. I'm glad of that, for I'm fond of her. You would like to stay here to-morrow, shouldn't you?'

'I should like to have this place to come and rest in, that's all,' said Baldassarre. 'I would pay for it, and harm nobody.'

'No, indeed; I think you are not a bad old man. But you look sorry about something. Tell me, is there anything you shall cry about when I leave you by yourself? I used to cry once.

'No, child; I think I shall cry no more.'

'That's right; and I'll bring you some breakfast, and show you the bimbo. Good-night.'

Tessa took up her bowl and lantern, and closed the door behind her. The pretty loving apparition had been no more to Baldassarre than a faint rainbow on the blackness to the man who is wrestling in deep waters. He hardly thought of her again till his dreamy waking passed into the more vivid images of disturbed sleep.

But Tessa thought much of him. She had no sooner entered the house than she told Monna Lisa what she had done, and insisted that the stranger should be allowed to come and rest in the outhouse when he liked. The old woman, who had had her notions of making him a useful tenant, made a great show of reluctance, shook her head, and urged that Messer Naldo would be angry if she let any one come about the house. Tessa did not believe that. Naldo had said nothing against strangers who lived nowhere; and this old man knew nobody except one person, who was not Nofri.

'Well,' conceded Monna Lisa, at last, 'if I let him stay for a while and carry things up the hill for me, thou must keep thy counsel and tell nobody.'

'No,' said Tessa, 'I'll only tell the bimbo.'

'And then,' Monna Lisa went on, in her thick undertone, 'God may love us well enough not to let Messer Naldo find out anything about it. For he never comes here but at dark; and as he was here two days ago, it's likely he'll never come at all till the old man's gone away again.'

'Oh me! Monna,' said Tessa, clasping her hands, 'I wish Naldo had not to go such a long, long way sometimes before he comes back again.'

'Ah, child! the world's big, they say. There are places behind the mountains, and if people go night and day, night and day, they get to Rome, and see the Holy Father.'

Tessa looked submissive in the presence of this mystery, and began to rock her baby, and sing syllables of vague loving meaning, in tones that imitated a triple chime.

The next morning she was unusually industrious in the prospect of more dialogue, and of the pleasure she should give the poor old stranger by showing him her baby. But before she could get ready to take Baldassarre his breakfast, she found that Monna Lisa had been employing him as a drawer of water. She deferred her paternosters, and hurried down to insist that Baldassarre should sit on his straw, so that she might come and sit by him again while he ate his breakfast. That attitude made the new companionship all the more delightful to Tessa, for she had been used to sitting on straw in old days along with her goats and mules.

'I will not let Monna Lisa give you too much work to do,' she said, bringing him some steaming broth and soft bread. 'I don't like much work, and I daresay you don't. I like sitting in the sunshine and feeding things. Monna Lisa says. work is good, but she does it all

herself, so I don't mind. She's not a cross old woman; you needn't be afraid of her being cross. And now, you eat that, and I'll go and fetch my baby and show it you.'

Presently she came back with the small mummy-case in her arms. The mummy looked very lively, having unusually large dark eyes though no more than the usual indication of a future nose.

'This is my baby,' said Tessa, seating herself close to Baldassarre. 'You didn't think it was so pretty, did you? It is like the little Gesu, and I should think the Santa Madonna would be kinder to me now, is it not true? But I have not much to ask for, because I have everything now - only that I should see my husband oftener. You may hold the bambino a little if you like, but I think you must not kiss him, because you might hurt him.'

She spoke this prohibition in a tone of soothing excuse, and Baldassarre could not refuse to hold the small package. 'Poor thing! poor thing!' he said, in a deep voice which had something strangely threatening in its apparent pity. It did not seem to him as if this guileless loving little woman could reconcile him to the world at all, but rather that she was with him against the world, that she was a creature who would need to be avenged.

'Oh, don't you be sorry for me,' she said; 'for though I don't see him often, he is more beautiful and good than anybody else in the world. I say prayers to him when he's away. You couldn't think what he is!'

She looked at Baldassarre with a wide glance of mysterious meaning, taking the baby from him again, and almost wishing he would question her as if he wanted very much to know more.

'Yes, I could,' said Baldassarre, rather bitterly.

'No, I'm sure you never could,' said Tessa, earnestly. 'You thought he might be Nofri,' she added, with a triumphant air of conclusiveness. 'But never mind; you couldn't know. What is your name?'

He rubbed his hand over his knitted brow, then looked at her blankly and said, 'Ah, child, what is it?'

It was not that he did not often remember his name well enough; and if he had had presence of mind now to remember it, he would have chosen not to tell it. But a sudden question appealing to his memory, had a paralysing effect, and in that moment he was conscious of nothing but helplessness.

Ignorant as Tessa was, the pity stirred in her by his blank look taught her to say -

'Never mind: you are a stranger, it is no matter about your having a name. Good-bye now, because I want my breakfast. You will come here and rest when you like; Monna Lisa says you may. And don't you be unhappy, for we'll be good to you.'

'Poor thing!' said Baldassarre again.