

Chapter 50 - Tessa Abroad and at Home

Another figure easily recognised by us - a figure not clad in black, but in the old red, green, and white - was approaching the Piazza that morning to see the Carnival. She came from an opposite point, for Tessa no longer lived on the hill of San Giorgio. After what had happened there with Baldassarre, Tito had thought it best for that and other reasons to find her a new home, but still in a quiet airy quarter, in a house bordering on the wide garden grounds north of the Porta Santa Croce.

Tessa was not come out sight-seeing without special leave. Tito had been with her the evening before, and she had kept back the entreaty which she felt to be swelling her heart and throat until she saw him in a state of radiant ease, with one arm round the sturdy Lillo, and the other resting gently on her own shoulder as she tried to make the tiny Ninna steady on her legs. She was sure then that the weariness with which he had come in and flung himself into his chair had quite melted away from his brow and lips. Tessa had not been slow at learning a few small stratagems by which she might avoid vexing Naldo and yet have a little of her own way. She could read nothing else, but she had learned to read a good deal in her husband's face.

And certainly the charm of that bright, gentle-humoured Tito who woke up under the Loggia de' Cerchi on a Lenten morning five years before, not having yet given any hostages to deceit, never returned so nearly as in the person of Naldo, seated in that straight-backed, carved arm-chair which he had provided for his comfort when he came to see Tessa and the children. Tito himself was surprised at the growing sense of relief which he felt in these moments. No guile was needed towards Tessa: she was too ignorant and too innocent to suspect him of anything. And the little voices calling him 'Babbo' were very sweet in his ears for the short while that he heard them. When he thought of leaving Florence, he never thought of leaving Tessa and the little ones behind. He was very fond of these round-cheeked, wide-eyed human things that clung about him and knew no evil of him. And wherever affection can spring, it is like the green leaf and the blossom - pure, and breathing purity, whatever soil it may grow in. Poor Romola, with all her self-sacrificing effort was really helping to harden Tito's nature by chilling it with a positive dislike which had beforehand seemed impossible in him; but Tessa kept open the fountains of kindness.

'Ninna is very good without me now,' began Tessa, feeling her request rising very high in her throat, and letting Ninna seat herself on the floor. 'I can leave her with Monna Lisa any time, and if she is in the cradle and cries, Lillo is as sensible as can be- he goes and thumps Monna Lisa.'

Lillo, whose great dark eyes looked all the darker because his curls were of a light brown like his mother's, jumped off Babbo's knee, and went forthwith to attest his intelligence by thumping Monna Lisa, who was shaking her head slowly over her spinning at the other end of the room.

'A wonderful boy!' said Tito, laughing.

'Isn't he?' said Tessa, eagerly, getting a little closer to him; 'and I might go and see the Carnival to-morrow, just for an hour or two, mightn't I?'

'Oh, you wicked pigeon!' said Tito, pinching her cheek; 'those are your longings, are they? What have you to do with carnivals now you are an old woman with two children?'

'But old women like to see things,' said Tessa, her lower lip hanging a little. 'Monna Lisa said she should like to go, only she's so deaf she can't hear what is behind her, and she thinks we couldn't take care of both the children.'

'No, indeed, Tessa,' said Tito, looking rather grave, 'you must not think of taking the children into the crowded streets, else I shall be angry.'

'But I have never been into the Piazza without leave,' said Tessa, in a frightened, pleading tone, 'since the Holy Saturday, and I think Nofri is dead, for you know the poor madre died; and I shall never forget the Carnival I saw once; it was so pretty - all roses and a king and queen under them - and singing. I liked it better than the San Giovanni.'

But there's nothing like that now, my Tessa. They are going to make a bonfire in the Piazza - that's all. But I cannot let you go out by yourself in the evening.'

'Oh no, no! I don't want to go in the evening. I only want to go and see the procession by daylight. There will be a procession - is it not true?'

'Yes, after a sort,' said Tito, 'as lively as a flight of cranes. You must not expect roses and glittering kings and queens, my Tessa. However, I suppose any string of people to be called a procession will please your blue eyes. And there's a thing they have raised in the Piazza de' Signori for the bonfire. You may like to see that. But come home early and look like a grave little old woman; and if you see any men with feathers and swords, keep out of their way: they are very fierce, and like to cut old women's heads off.'

Santa Madonna! where do they come from? Ah! you are laughing; it is not so bad. But I will keep away from them. Only,' Tessa went on in a whisper, putting her lips near Naldo's ear, 'if I might take Lillo with me! He is very sensible.'

'But who will thump Monna Lisa then, if she doesn't hear?' said Tito, finding it difficult not to laugh, but thinking it necessary to look serious. 'No, Tessa, you could not take care of Lillo if you got into a crowd, and he's too heavy for you to carry him.'

'It is true,' said Tessa, rather sadly, 'and he likes to run away. I forgot that. Then I will go alone. But now look at Ninna - you have not looked at her enough.'

Ninna was a blue-eyed thing, at the tottering, tumbling age - a fair solid, which, like a loaded die, found its base with a constancy that warranted prediction. Tessa went to snatch her up, and when Babbo was paying due attention to the recent teeth and other marvels, she said, in a whisper, 'And shall I buy some confetti for the children?'

Tito drew some small coins from his scarsella, and poured them into her palm.

'That will buy no end,' said Tessa, delighted at this abundance. 'I shall not mind going without Lillo so much, if I bring him something.'

So Tessa set out in the morning towards the great Piazza where the bonfire was to be. She did not think the February breeze cold enough to demand further covering than her green woollen dress. A mantle would have been oppressive, for it would have hidden a new necklace and a new clasp, mounted with silver, the only ornamental presents Tito had ever made her. Tessa did not think at all of showing her figure, for no one had ever told her it was pretty; but she was quite sure that her necklace and clasp were of the prettiest sort ever worn by the richest contadina, and she arranged her white hood over her head so that the front of her necklace might be well displayed. These ornaments, she considered, must inspire respect for her as the wife of some one who could afford to buy them.

She tripped along very cheerily in the February sunshine, thinking much of the purchases for the little ones, with which she was to fill her small basket, and not thinking at all of any one who might be observing her. Yet her descent from her upper storey into the street had been watched, and she was being kept in sight as she walked by a person who had often waited in vain to see if it were not Tessa who lived in that house to which he had more than once dogged Tito. Baldassarre was carrying a package of yarn: he was constantly employed in that way, as a means of earning his scanty bread, and

keeping the sacred fire of vengeance alive; and he had come out of his way this morning, as he had often done before, that he might pass by the house to which he had followed Tito in the evening. His long imprisonment had so intensified his timid suspicion and his belief in some diabolic fortune favouring Tito, that he had not dared to pursue him, except under cover of a crowd or of the darkness; he felt, with instinctive horror, that if Tito's eyes fell upon him, he should again be held up to obloquy, again be dragged away; his weapon would be taken from him, and he should be cast helpless into a prison-cell. His fierce purpose had become as stealthy as a serpent's, which depends for its prey on one dart of the fang. Justice was weak and unfriended; and he could not hear again the voice that pealed the promise of vengeance in the Duomo; he had been there again and again, but that voice, too, had apparently been stifled by cunning strong-armed wickedness. For a long while, Baldassarre's ruling thought was to ascertain whether Tito still wore the armour, for now at last his fainting hope would have been contented with a successful stab on this side the grave; but he would never risk his precious knife again. It was a weary time he had had to wait for the chance of answering this question by touching Tito's back in the press of the street. Since then, the knowledge that the sharp steel was useless, and that he had no hope but in some new device, had fallen with leaden weight on his enfeebled mind. A dim vision of winning one of those two wives to aid him came before him continually, and continually slid away. The wife who had lived on the hill was no longer there. If he could find her again, he might grasp some thread of a project, and work his way to more clearness.

And this morning he had succeeded. He was quite certain now where this wife lived, and as he walked, bent a little under his burden of yarn, yet keeping the green and white figure in sight, his mind was dwelling upon her and her circumstances as feeble eyes dwell on lines and colours, trying to interpret them into consistent significance.

Tessa had to pass through various long streets without seeing any other sign of the Carnival than unusual groups of the country people in their best garments, and that disposition in everybody to chat and loiter which marks the early hours of a holiday, before the spectacle has begun. Presently, in her disappointed search for remarkable objects, her eyes fell on a man with a pedlar's basket before him, who seemed to be selling nothing but little red crosses to all the passengers. A little red cross would be pretty to hang up over her bed; it would also help to keep off harm, and would perhaps make Ninna stronger. Tessa went to the other side of the street that she might ask the pedlar the price of the crosses, fearing that they would cost a little too much for her to spare from her purchase of sweets. The pedlar's back had been turned towards her hitherto, but when she came near him she recognised an old acquaintance of the Mercato, Bratti

Ferravecchi, and, accustomed to feel that she was to avoid old acquaintances, she turned away again and passed to the other side of the street. But Bratti's eye was too well practised in looking out at the corner after possible customers, for her movement to have escaped him, and she was presently arrested by a tap on the arm from one of the red crosses.

'Young woman,' said Bratti, as she unwillingly turned her head, 'you come from some castello a good way off, it seems to me, else you'd never think of walking about, this blessed Carnival, without a red cross in your hand. Santa Madonna! Four white quattrini is a small price to pay for your soul - prices rise in purgatory, let me tell you.'

'Oh, I should like one,' said Tessa, hastily, 'but I couldn't spare four white quattrini.'

Bratti had at first regarded Tessa too abstractedly as a mere customer to look at her with any scrutiny, but when she began to speak he exclaimed, 'By the head of San Giovanni, it must be the little Tessa, and looking as fresh as a ripe apple! What! you've done none the worse, then, for running away from father Nofri? You were in the right of it, for he goes on crutches now, and a crabbed fellow with crutches is dangerous; he can reach across the house and beat a woman as he sits.'

'I'm married,' said Tessa, rather demurely, remembering Naldo's command that she should behave with gravity; 'and my husband takes great care of me.'

'Ah, then, you've fallen on your feet! Nofri said you were good-for-nothing vermin; but what then? An ass may bray a good while before he shakes the stars down. I always said you did well to run away, and it isn't often Bratti's in the wrong. Well, and so you've got a husband and plenty of money? Then you'll never think much of giving four white quattrini for a red cross. I get no profit; but what with the famine and the new religion, all other merchandise is gone down. You live in the country where the chestnuts are plenty, eh? You've never wanted for polenta, I can see.'

'No, I've never wanted anything,' said Tessa, still on her guard.

'Then you can afford to buy a cross. I got a Padre to bless them, and you get blessing and all for four quattrini. It isn't for the profit; I hardly get a danaro by the whole lot. But then they're holy wares, and it's getting harder and harder work to see your way to Paradise: the very Carnival is like Holy Week, and the least you can do to keep the Devil from getting the upper hand is to buy a cross. God guard you!

think what the Devil's tooth is! You've seen him biting the man in San Giovanni, I should hope?'

Tessa felt much teased and frightened. 'Oh, Bratti,' she said, with a discomposed face, 'I want to buy a great many confetti: I've got little Lillo and Ninna at home. And nice coloured sweet things cost a great deal. And they will not like the cross so well, though I know it would be good to have it.'

'Come, then,' said Bratti, fond of laying up a store of merits by imagining possible extortions and then heroically renouncing them, 'since you're an old acquaintance, you shall have it for two quattrini. It's making you a present of the cross, to say nothing of the blessing.'

Tessa was reaching out her two quattrini with trembling hesitation, when Bratti said abruptly, 'Stop a bit! Where do you live?'

'Oh, a long way off,' she answered, almost automatically, being preoccupied with her quattrini; 'beyond San Ambrogio, in the Via Piccola, at the top of the house where the wood is stacked below.'

'Very good,' said Bratti, in a patronising tone; then I'll let you have the cross on trust, and call for the money. So you live inside the gates? Well, well, I shall be passing.'

'No, no!' said Tessa, frightened lest Naldo should be angry at this revival of an old acquaintance. 'I can spare the money. Take it now.'

'No,' said Bratti, resolutely; 'I'm not a hard-hearted pedlar. I'll call and see if you've got any rags, and you shall make a bargain. See, here's the cross: and there's Pippo's shop not far behind you: you can go and fill your basket, and I must go and get mine empty. Addio, piccina.'

Bratti went on his way, and Tessa, stimulated to change her money into confetti before further accident, went into Pippo's shop, a little fluttered by the thought that she had let Bratti know more about her than her husband would approve. There were certainly more dangers in coming to see the Carnival than in staying at home; and she would have felt this more strongly if she had known that the wicked old man, who had wanted to kill her husband on the hill, was still keeping her in sight. But she had not noticed the man with the burden on his back.

The consciousness of having a small basketful of things to make the children glad, dispersed her anxiety, and as she entered the Via de' Libraj her face had its usual expression of childlike content. And now she thought there was really a procession coming, for she saw white robes and a banner, and her heart began to palpitate with

expectation. She stood a little aside, but in that narrow street there was the pleasure of being obliged to look very close. The banner was pretty: it was the Holy Mother with the Babe, whose love for her Tessa had believed in more and more since she had had her babies; and the figures in white had not only green wreaths on their heads, but little red crosses by their side, which caused her some satisfaction that she also had her red cross. Certainly, they looked as beautiful as the angels on the clouds, and to Tessa's mind they too had a background of cloud, like everything else that came to her in life. How and whence did they come? She did not mind much about knowing. But one thing surprised her as newer than wreaths and crosses; it was that some of the white figures carried baskets between them. What could the baskets be for?

But now they were very near, and, to her astonishment, they wheeled aside and came straight up to her. She trembled as she would have done if St Michael in the picture had shaken his head at her, and was conscious of nothing but terrified wonder till she saw close to her a round boyish face, lower than her own, and heard a treble voice saying, 'Sister, you carry the Anathema about you. Yield it up to the blessed Gesu, and He will adorn you with the gems of His grace.'

Tessa was only more frightened, understanding nothing. Her first conjecture settled on her basket of sweets. They wanted that, these alarming angels. Oh dear, dear! She looked down at it.

'No, sister,' said a taller youth, pointing to her necklace and the clasp of her belt, 'it is those vanities that are the Anathema. Take off that necklace and unclasp that belt, that they may be burned in the holy Bonfire of Vanities, and save you from burning.'

'It is the truth, my sister,' said a still taller youth, evidently the archangel of this band. 'Listen to these voices speaking the divine message. You already carry a red cross: let that be your only adornment. Yield up your necklace and belt, and you shall obtain grace.'

This was too much. Tessa, overcome with awe, dared not say 'no,' but she was equally unable to render up her beloved necklace and clasp. Her pouting lips were quivering, the tears rushed to her eyes, and a great drop fell. For a moment she ceased to see anything; she felt nothing but confused terror and misery. Suddenly a gentle hand was laid on her arm, and a soft, wonderful voice, as if the Holy Madonna were speaking, said, 'Do not be afraid; no one shall harm you.'

Tessa looked up and saw a lady in black, with a young heavenly face and loving hazel eyes. She had never seen any one like this lady before, and under other circumstances might have had awe-struck

thoughts about her; but now everything else was overcome by the sense that loving protection was near her. The tears only fell the faster, relieving her swelling heart, as she looked up at the heavenly face, and, putting her hand to her necklace, said sobbingly -

'I can't give them to be burnt. My husband - he bought them for me - and they are so pretty - and Ninna - oh, I wish I'd never come!'

'Do not ask her for them,' said Romola, speaking to the white-robed boys in a tone of mild authority. 'It answers no good end for people to give up such things against their will. That is not what Fra Girolamo approves: he would have such things given up freely.'

Madonna Romola's word was not to be resisted, and the white train moved on. They even moved with haste, as if some new object had caught their eyes; and Tessa felt with bliss that they were gone, and that her necklace and clasp were still with her.

'Oh, I will go back to the house,' she said, still agitated; 'I will go nowhere else. But if I should meet them again, and you not be there?' she added, expecting everything from this heavenly lady.

'Stay a little,' said Romola. 'Come with me under this doorway, and we will hide the necklace and clasp, and then you will be in no danger.'

She led Tessa under the archway, and said, 'Now, can we find room for your necklace and belt in your basket? Ah! your basket is full of crisp things that will break: let us be careful, and lay the heavy necklace under them.'

It was like a change in a dream to Tessa - the escape from nightmare into floating safety and joy - to find herself taken care of by this lady, so lovely, and powerful, and gentle. She let Romola unfasten her necklace and clasp, while she herself did nothing but look up at the face that bent over her.

'They are sweets for Lillo and Ninna,' she said, as Romola carefully lifted up the light parcels in the basket, and placed the ornaments below them.

'Those are your children?' said Romola, smiling. 'And you would rather go home to them than see any more of the Carnival? Else you have not far to go to the Piazza de' Signori, and there you would see the pile for the great bonfire.'

'No, oh no!' said Tessa, eagerly; 'I shall never like bonfires again. I will go back.'

'You live at some castello, doubtless,' said Romola, not waiting for an answer. 'Towards which gate do you go?'

'Towards Por' Santa Croce.'

'Come, then,' said Romola, taking her by the hand and leading her to the corner of a street nearly opposite. 'If you go down there,' she said, pausing, 'you will soon be in a straight road. And I must leave you now, because some one else expects me. You will not be frightened. Your pretty things are quite safe now. Addio.'

'Addio, Madonna,' said Tessa, almost in a whisper, not knowing what else it would be right to say; and in an instant the heavenly lady was gone. Tessa turned to catch a last glimpse, but she only saw the tall gliding figure vanish round the projecting stonework. So she went on her way in wonder, longing to be once more safely housed with Monna Lisa, undesirous of carnivals for evermore.

Baldassarre had kept Tessa in sight till the moment of her parting with Romola: then he went away with his bundle of yarn. It seemed to him that he had discerned a clue which might guide him if he could only grasp the necessary details firmly enough. He had seen the two wives together, and the sight had brought to his conceptions that vividness which had been wanting before. His power of imagining facts needed to be reinforced continually by the senses. The tall wife was the noble and rightful wife; she had the blood in her that would be readily kindled to resentment; she would know what scholarship was, and how it might lie locked in by the obstructions of the stricken body, like a treasure buried by earthquake. She could believe him: she would be inclined to believe him, if he proved to her that her husband was unfaithful. Women cared about that: they would take vengeance for that. If this wife of Tito's loved him, she would have a sense of injury which Baldassarre's mind dwelt on with keen longing, as if it would be the strength of another Will added to his own, the strength of another mind to form devices.

Both these wives had been kind to Baldassarre, and their acts towards him, being bound up with the very image of them, had not vanished from his memory; yet the thought of their pain could not present itself to him as a check. To him it seemed that pain was the order of the world for all except the hard and base. If any were innocent, if any were noble, where could the utmost gladness lie for them? Where it lay for him - in unconquerable hatred and triumphant vengeance. But he must be cautious: he must watch this wife in the Via de' Bardi, and learn more of her; for even here frustration was possible. There was no power for him now but in patience.