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Tessa, Our Little Italian Cousin



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Preface

Many people from other lands have crossed the ocean to make a new home for themselves in America. They love its freedom. They are happy here under its kindly rule. They suffer less from want and hunger than in the country of their birthplace.

Their children are blessed with the privilege of attending fine schools and with the right to learn about this wonderful world, side by side with the sons and daughters of our most successful and wisest people.

Among these newer-comers to America are the Italians, many of whom will never again see their own country, of which they are still so justly proud. They will tell you it is a land of wonderful beauty; that it has sunsets so glorious that both artists and poets try to picture them for us again and again; that its history is that of a strong and mighty people who once held rule over all the civilized world; that thousands of travellers visit its shores every year to look upon its paintings and its statues, for it may truly be called the art treasure-house of the world.

When you meet your little Italian cousins, with their big brown eyes and olive skins, whether it be in school or on the street, perhaps you will feel a little nearer and more friendly if you turn your attention for a while to their home, and the home of the brave and wise Columbus who left it that he might find for you in the far West your own loved country, your great, grand, free America.

CHAPTER I

TESSA

"There comes babbo! There comes babbo!" cried Tessa, as she ran down the narrow street to meet her father, with baby Francesca toddling after her.

The man was not alone, – Beppo and the donkey were with him. They were very tired, for it was a hard trip from the little village on the hilltop to the great city, miles away, and back again. The donkey was not of much help on the homeward journey, either. Poor little patient beast! he was getting old now, and he felt that his day's work was done when he had carried a load of nuts and vegetables to Rome in the morning. But when he had to bring Beppo back again, he felt a little bit sulky. So it was no wonder that he stood quite still every few minutes and did not seem to hear his little master scold.

"Get up, Pietro, get up. We shall be late to supper," Beppo would say, but the donkey would not move till Beppo's father used the whip. He did not strike hard enough to hurt the poor creature, though. Oh no, the kind man would not do that, he was too gentle. But he must make the donkey know the whip was there, or they would never get home.

When they had crossed the wide plain and reached the foot of the hill, Beppo got down and walked. It was too hard on Pietro to make him carry even a little boy now.

They came up the narrow road slowly till they reached the village. And just as the sunset spread over the sky, and gave a glory even to the stones, Tessa caught sight of them.

"My darling Tessa," said her father. "My dear little Francesca." Tired as he was, he took the two children in his arms and hugged them as though he had been away many days. Yet he had left them at five o'clock that very morning.

"We have good news for you, Beppo and I," he went on.

Beppo laughed till the high, pointed hat nearly fell off his head.

"Oh, yes, good news," said Beppo. "You cannot think what it is, Tessa. May I tell her, babbo?"

"Yes, my child," his father answered.

"You are to go to Rome to-morrow with babbo and me. The great artist who buys our fruit wants to see you. He thinks he may want you for a model. And me, too, Tessa, he wants me! He will put us both in a picture. Babbo said you also had long hair, and that we look much alike.

"Only think, Tessa! he will pay babbo for letting him paint us. And mother shall have a new dress, and you shall have some red ribbons. We will all have a feast. Say, Tessa, is there a nice chestnut cake waiting for our supper? I am so hungry."

The boy's great black eyes sparkled as he told the story. His long hair hung down over his shoulders, under the odd pointed hat. He was a beautiful child. It was no wonder the American artist wished to put him in a picture.

But Tessa was beautiful, too. The artist would not be disappointed when he saw her. Her skin was clear, but like the colour of the olives which grew on the old tree behind her house. And now there was a faint pink blush in her cheeks as she listened to Beppo's story.

They were very happy children, but oh, so poor, you would think if you should visit them in the old house where they have always lived. It is no wonder they like best to be outdoors.

The house is all of stone, and the floor is made of bricks. It seems dark and chilly inside after leaving the glorious sunset. The plaster is blackened with smoke and age. In some places it is broken away from the wall and is falling down.

But there is a picture of the Christ-child hanging over the rough table, and the children do not think of the dingy walls. It is home, where a loving father and mother watch over them and guard them from harm.

See! the table is spread with the simple supper. There are the cakes made from chestnut flour mixed with olive oil, and of which Beppo is so fond. And here is milk from Tessa's pet goat. Beppo runs over to the stone fountain in the middle of the village and fills a copper dish with fresh water, and the little family sit down to their evening meal.

The mother hears the good news, and claps her hands in delight. But what shall Tessa wear? It troubles the good soul, for Tessa has no shoes, and both of her dresses are old and worn.

"Never mind, never mind," says her husband, "don't trouble yourself about that. The artist says he does not care about the clothes. He was much pleased with Beppo's cloak, however. He says it will be fine in the picture. Let Tessa wear her wide straw hat and her old clothes; that is all he asks."

"But how will she manage to travel so far? The child has never before gone such a distance from home," continued her mother.

"She is not heavy. She can sit on Pietro's back between the panniers. I will not load them heavily to-morrow, and then Pietro will not complain. And when we come home at night, Beppo can walk, I am sure. He may be tired, but he is a stout lad, my Beppo is. What do you say, my boy?"

Beppo was sure he could get along. He was only too glad to have Tessa's company.

"But think, babbo," he exclaimed, "it is not for one day that the artist wishes us. It is many, many, before the picture will be finished. We can manage somehow, I am sure. I am nearly twelve years old now, and I am getting very strong."

"But what will mother do with me away all day long?" said Tessa. "Who will take care of the baby while she works in the garden? And who will help her pull the weeds?"

"Bruno shall watch Francesca. He will let no harm come to her, you may be sure. Besides, she can walk alone so well now, she is little care. As for the garden, there is not much more to do at present. It almost takes care of itself," said the mother.

"Yes, Bruno can be trusted," said the father, "he is the best dog I ever knew."

As he heard his name spoken, the sheep-dog came slowly out of the chimney-corner. He wagged his tail as though he knew what his master and mistress had been saying. Beppo threw him his last bit of cake and Bruno caught it on his nose, from which it was quickly passed into his mouth.

"Dear old Bruno," said Tessa, "you took care of me when I was a baby, didn't you? Mamma, did Bruno really rock the cradle and keep the flies off, so I could sleep?"

"Yes, my child; when I was very ill he would watch you all day long. And when you began to creep, he followed you about. If you got near the edge of a step, or any other unsafe place, he would lift you by your dress and bring you to my side. We should thank the good Lord for bringing Bruno to us."

The mother looked up to the picture of Jesus and made the sign of the cross on her breast.

An hour later the whole family were sound asleep on their hard beds.

CHAPTER II

ROME

About four o'clock the next morning every one was awake and stirring. There was much to be done. The vegetables and fruits must be gathered; the donkey fed and saddled; Tessa's hair must be carefully combed and arranged in two long braids, and the breakfast of hard bread and olives eaten.

Tessa could not eat as much as usual to-day, she was so greatly excited. Think of it! This was to be her first trip to the great city. Her father and Beppo had told her so much about the wonderful sights there, and now she was going to look at them with her own eyes. Perhaps she would see the children of the artist. Beppo had told her of their blue eyes and golden hair. He called them little angels.

Ah! she would like to be fair like them, she thought, as she looked in her tiny mirror. She did not dream how they would admire her own sweet dark face and soft voice.

Now it was six o'clock and time to start. Tessa seated herself on Pietro's back with her legs hidden by the bags of fruit. Beppo walked by her side, while her father went ahead leading Pietro by a rope.

Although it was so early, everybody in the village seemed to be up and doing. As she passed along, Tessa nodded good morning to the old women knitting or braiding straw on the door-steps.

"Pietro, do be careful," she cried, as the donkey picked his way among babies tumbling over each other in the narrow street while the older children played about them.

Our little party passed the fountain where a group of women were doing the family washing. Every one had a good word for Tessa, and wished her well, for the good news of last night had travelled from house to house.

The narrow streets were paved with blocks of black lava which had once flowed red-hot from the volcano, Vesuvius. High stone buildings that were hundreds of years old stood on each side. Perhaps in far-away times they had been forts or castles, but now the simple peasants lived in them with no thought of the grand old days of their country.

For this was Italy, the land of sunny skies and the treasure-house of the world. Look in your geography at the map of Europe and find the oddly shaped peninsula that stretches downward between two seas. It looks something like a man's boot, don't you think so?

Tessa doesn't know anything about the shape of her country, however. She has never studied geography. In fact, she can't even read, for she has been to school only six months altogether.

The good priest in the village loves the little girl. He has known Beppo and Tessa ever since they were born. He has tried to make it possible for these children to get learning, but many things have happened to prevent their studying.

One winter their father had a broken leg; at another, their mother was sick in bed for one whole year. When that trouble was over, the chestnut crop was very poor, and every one in the family had to work hard to earn enough to save them from starving. Something had been the matter nearly all the time, yet they had kept cheerful and happy. A change would come at last, if they loved the good Lord as they should. This is what Tessa's mother had said again and again.

The little girl thought of her mother's words as she rode proudly off on the donkey.

One of Beppo's boy friends went with them as far as the pasture-land below the village. He was driving a flock of goats which he must tend during the day. It was an easy life, but very tedious, and the boy wished he could go to the city, too. He had been there once, to the carnival. It was the grand time of his life, and he loved to tell the story over and over to his young friends.

At first the donkey trotted along quite merrily. His feet were so sure that Tessa had no fear of his stumbling, though the way at first was steep and stony.

"Good Pietro," said his little rider as she patted his head.

Perhaps the praise was too much for him, for Pietro turned his head to one side and came to a standstill. An idea seemed to have come to him. It was time for rest and a lunch. Look at those nice tufts of grass by the roadside. They must not be left behind. And Pietro began to nibble, as though he had no idea of the important business of the day.

Tessa coaxed and Beppo scolded, but the donkey would not budge. It was only when his master turned back and snapped the whip, that he changed his mind about going forward.

This was only the first of many such stops before they drew near the city that was once the greatest in the whole world. It well deserved the name of Rome, or "The Famous."

"What are those large mounds we are passing?" Tessa asked her father as she looked off over the Campagna.

"Those are tombs of men who lived ages ago in this loved country of ours. They were very great, and did noble deeds."

"But, babbo, there is a house built on one of the mounds."

"Yes, my child, the people have not kept them honoured as they should."

"Tessa, look at that stone water-way running through the plain," said Beppo. "They have told me in the city that a great ruler built it thousands of years ago. Think of that, Tessa. Thousands! It cost vast sums of money, and was made to bring the water to the city from the distant mountains. In those days great quantities of water were used in immense bath-houses. But see, we are passing an inn. I wish we were rich enough to go in and have some lunch."

His father heard Beppo's words. "Don't wish for what you cannot have, my boy," he said. "Look at that poor old man tending his flock of sheep, and be glad you are young and gay. That is best of all."

The Italians dread old age, and many of the peasants fear death. Beppo saw the shadow pass across his father's face, and, like a good son, tried to make it look as cheerful as usual.

"You shall not grow old and bent like that, babbo. Tessa and I will soon be able to let you take your ease. What do you say, sister?"

Tessa laughed, and answered, "Oh, yes, babbo, your work is nearly done now, for we are fast growing up."

Tessa was only nine years old, but coming to the city to be a model made her feel as though she were a young woman already. They now entered the wonderful city filled with treasures.

It disappointed Tessa at first. The streets were narrow and crooked, like those of her own little village. The high stone houses looked dark and gloomy. And there were beggars here! They looked poorer and more ragged than any people at home. Here was an old blind woman holding out a plate in which the passers-by were asked to put a piece of money. Tessa wished she could help her, but she was too poor herself, and the party passed on.

"You can't tell about these places by the outside," Beppo whispered. "Many of them are palaces, Tessa. Just wait till we come to our artist's house. It is grand inside, and there is a court in the middle of the building with fountains and statues and beautiful plants. And back of the house – but I won't tell you any more. You must wait till you get there. It is very lovely."

At last the donkey came to a standstill in front of a tall building. It was seven stories high and was all of marble.

"You knew when to stop, little beastie," said his master. "You never make mistakes of that kind, if you do like to nibble the grass at the wrong time. Get down, Tessa, this is where Mr. Gray lives."

"The artist has his studio far up at the top of the building. You are to go there this morning, but his family live on the fourth piano. Good-bye, little ones. Be good children." The father kissed them lovingly and went away with Pietro to sell his fruit.

Piano, as applied to a building, means floor in Italian. It is very common in Italy to find very different kinds of people living on the several floors, or pianos, of one building. In this old palace, which Tessa and Beppo entered for the first time, very poor and dirty families were huddled together

on the first floor with their dogs and other pets. Yes, even the horse of one of the families shared their home in this fine building.

But overhead, on the second floor, there lived a prince, a real live prince, with a dozen servants to wait on him. It did not trouble him that poor and dirty people were below him, because the walls were high and thick, and the floors were of marble. He did not seem to know even that there were such people in the world.

Beppo and Tessa climbed twenty-seven marble steps before they came to the second piano; and still they must keep going up, up, up, until they reached the very top.

"Stop, stop," Tessa had to say more than once. "I am quite out of breath, and then, too, I am scared just a little bit. Beppo, do I look all right? Do you think the artist will take me?"

Then Beppo would put his arm around his sister and comfort her with loving words. But at last the studio was reached, and the children, flushed and excited, knocked at the door.

"My father came with us to the city to-day. He said you wished to see us," Beppo grew bold enough to say when a pleasant-faced gentleman opened the door. "He will call for us again to-night."

"Come in, little ones," the gentleman answered in Italian. "I am glad you are here. This is Beppo, I believe. I have seen you before. And here is the little sister. How do you do, my child? Make yourselves quite at home in these easy chairs."

While he was speaking to the children he was thinking, "How beautiful the little girl is! She will do finely. The two will make a great picture. My own children must see them."

Then he went on talking with Tessa. He showed her some curiosities and she soon forgot her bashfulness. But it was a long day. To be sure, the children had a delicious lunch which a servant brought up to the studio. The kind artist insisted they should not touch the food they had brought with them from home.

But after all, it was very tiresome to sit quite still for half an hour at a time. And all the while the strange gentleman's eyes were fixed on them while his hand was busy with the brush.

"This is just a sketch to-day, children. After this, I shall need only one of you at a time. But I like to have you come together, nevertheless. And now your work is over for the day.

"Pretty hard not to move about freely, little one, isn't it?" he said, as he patted Tessa on the chin. Then he rang the bell and told the servant to call his own children up to the studio. He would not have done this if he had not seen that his young models were unlike many of the poor children of the city.

"They are gentle and polite, if they are peasants," he said to himself. "My wife will be pleased, for Lucy and Arthur are lonesome and need some playmates of their own age."

A moment afterward merry voices were heard and the Gray children came skipping into the room.

"They are certainly angels," Tessa said to herself when she saw the golden curls of Lucy and the fair, sweet faces of her brother and herself. But she could not tell what they said, for they spoke in a strange tongue.

"It is not soft like our own dear Italian," she whispered to Beppo. "It is hard, this American language."

"They call it English, and not American," her brother answered. "I am going to learn it sometime, myself."

The artist turned from them to his own children. He spoke in Italian. "Lucy and Arthur are just beginning to speak your tongue, Tessa, but they learn fast. They wish to know you and Beppo. I told them you were coming. They would like to play with you, but as yet they cannot talk much Italian. It is an hour yet before your father will come for you. Would you like to go down into the garden and walk among the flowers for a little while?"

Tessa's eyes sparkled with delight, and her heart beat quite fast when Lucy stretched out her white hand and held fast her own brown one.

"Come, Tessa and Beppo," said Arthur, who now spoke to his young visitors for the first time. "Come, and I will show you the garden."

The four children left the studio and ran down the great staircase. They did not stop until they found themselves on the ground floor. Then they passed out through a wide doorway into the courtyard.

Tessa held her breath with delight.

"Beppo, Beppo, look at that fountain," she cried. "And see the lovely cherub with its wings spread."

Lucy understood the words and she was pleased.

"The prince owns this court," she said, "but he has told father that we may come here and bring our friends when we like. Let us go into the gardens beyond."

The little Italians had hardly time to notice the statues and the beautiful plants before they were led into the great garden.

Here were orange-trees loaded with the yellow fruit. There were beds of flowers in bloom, although it was late in November. Beyond, were stone walls over which delicate vines were creeping, and marble statues were half hidden in the niches.

"There is a lizard," cried Arthur. "Don't you see him creeping along that stone wall? He's a little fellow, but, oh, my, he's quick in his motions."

"Listen!" said Beppo, who had forgotten his shyness now. "I will charm him. But you must all keep still."

He gave a long, low whistle. The lizard, which had crept into a hole, raised his head and looked toward the children in delight, as he drew himself to the top of the wall and lay quite still.

Again Beppo whistled in the same way, and the lizard crept nearer. And now he stretched himself at length upon the walk at Beppo's feet.

"I could keep him charmed like that all day long," said the boy. "It is queer, isn't it? Did you ever notice a lizard's feet?"

"What do you mean? The odd way the toes swell out on the edges?" Arthur asked.

"Yes. That is why the creature can walk across the ceiling like a fly. But it isn't the only reason, for a sticky substance oozes out, and that helps his feet to fasten themselves. I've seen them do it many times."

"I wonder how they make that queer noise," said Lucy.

"They smack their tongues back in their mouths, somehow," answered Beppo. "They are ugly little things, aren't they? But mother won't let me kill them when they get in the house, because they eat up the flies and spiders."

The children were walking now between two rows of laurel-trees.

"How dark and glossy the leaves are," said Lucy. "I think they are lovely. I like to get them and make wreaths. Then I take them up-stairs and put them on father's and mother's heads. I pretend I am crowning them as the heroes in Italy were crowned long ago." Lucy forgot her Italian and fell into English before she had half finished. It was no wonder that Tessa and Beppo could not understand.

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