

Bronze Boar

In the city of Florence, not far from the Piazza del Granduca, there is a small alleyway called, if I am not mistaken, Porta Rossa. Here, before the vegetable and greens market, stands a bronze boar of exquisite workmanship; from its mouth flows pure, fresh water. The animal itself has grown quite black with time, only its snout shines like polished metal: it has been polished by hundreds of hands of poor people, children and adults alike, who embraced it and held their parched mouths beneath the stream of water. Just to watch some pretty half-naked little boy embrace the beautiful creature and bring his fresh little mouth close to its snout—is a true picture! Anyone who comes to Florence will easily find this place: one need only ask any beggar, and he will immediately tell you where the bronze boar is located.

It was an early winter evening; the mountains lay all covered in snow, yet the moon shone in the sky, and the moon in Italy shines so brightly that it turns night into day—no worse than our dark winter days. But why do I say "no worse"? Even better, for here the very air seems to glow, and the sky appears to rise higher, whereas up north, that cold leaden roof—the sky—simply presses us down toward the damp earth which sooner or later will press shut the lid of our coffin.

In the ducal garden, beneath the shade of fir trees where thousands of roses bloom even in winter, a little ragged boy had sat all day long. The lad could have served as a living image of Italy: he radiated beauty and at the same time looked so pitiful, so unhappy... He terribly wanted something to eat and drink, yet no one had given him a single coin today. Meanwhile, darkness fell, it was time to close the garden, and the guard chased the boy out. For a long time the poor child stood lost in thought upon the bridge spanning the Arno, gazing at the stars shimmering in the water.

Then he made his way to the bronze boar, bent down, wrapped his little arm around its neck, and, bringing his mouth close to its shining snout, began greedily swallowing the fresh water. Nearby lay a few lettuce leaves and a couple of chestnuts—they served him for supper. There was not a soul in the street; the boy was all alone, and he seated himself upon the bronze boar, leaned his curly little head against the animal's head, and instantly fell asleep.

At midnight the bronze boar stirred, and the boy clearly heard: "Hold on tight, little one, now I shall run!" And indeed the boar set off with the boy at full gallop. What a ride that was!

First they headed toward the Piazza del Granduca; the bronze horse upon the ducal monument neighed loudly; the colorful coats of arms on the old town hall glowed like transparencies, and Michelangelo's David swung his sling; everywhere some strange life awakened. The bronze groups "Perseus" and "The Rape of the Sabine Women" stood as though alive; a cry of mortal terror rang out across the magnificent deserted square.

Near the Palazzo Uffizi, beneath the arch where all the Florentine nobility gathers during carnival, the bronze boar stopped.

"Hold on tight!" it said to the boy. "Now march up the stairs!"

Throughout all this time the little boy had not uttered a single word, trembling both from fear and from joy. Thus they entered a long gallery; the boy knew it well: he had been here before. The walls were variegated with paintings, busts and statues stood everywhere, illuminated by wonderful light; it seemed as though bright day reigned here. But it became even more splendid when the door to the side halls opened! All this splendor was quite familiar to the boy, yet this time everything appeared to him in some special, miraculous illumination.

Here before him stood a lovely naked woman—such perfection of nature could be reproduced in marble only by the art of an incomparable artist. Her divine forms breathed life, dolphins played at her feet, immortality sparkled in her gaze. People call her the Venus de' Medici. On both sides of the goddess stood marble statues of wonderful youths: one was sharpening a sword—he is called "The Whetstone"; upon another pedestal gladiators wrestled. And the sword was being sharpened, and the fighters battled for the goddess of beauty.

All this brilliance nearly blinded the little boy; the walls shimmered with multicolored paints; everything was life itself, movement itself. There was yet another depiction of Venus, an earthly Venus, full of life and fire, just as she appeared in Titian's dreams. Yes, these were two wondrous female images! The beautiful, utterly uncovered body of Titian's Venus rested upon a soft couch; her breast rose gently, her head moved slightly, her luxuriant hair fell upon her rounded shoulders, and her dark eyes burned with passion. None of the paintings, however, dared to step completely out of their frames. The goddess of beauty herself, the gladiators, and the whetstone-keeper likewise remained in their places: they were bound by the radiance pouring forth from the image of the Madonna, Jesus, and John. The saints ceased to be paintings; they had become the saints themselves!

What beauty, what splendor reigned in these halls! The bronze boar walked through them step by step, and the boy saw everything. One spectacle displaced

another from his memory, yet one painting left an indelible mark upon his soul, chiefly because of the joyful, happy children depicted therein; the boy had already seen them once during the day.

Many perhaps would pass by this painting, yet it is a true treasure of poetry. It depicts Christ descending into hell, but around Him crowd not tormented sinners, but pagans. The painting was executed by the Florentine Angelo Bronzino. Best of all is the expression upon the children's faces: a firm confidence that they will ascend to heaven. Two little ones already embrace each other; one, standing somewhat higher, stretches out his hands to the one standing lower, pointing thereby with his finger at himself, as if saying: "I am going to heaven!" Upon the faces of the adults, however, are written a timid, uncertain hope and humble supplication.

The boy gazed longest at this painting; the bronze boar stood still, and suddenly a quiet sigh was heard. Whence did it issue? From the painting or from the breast of the animal? The boy stretched out his hand toward the smiling children, but the boar dashed back into the front hall.

"Thank you, dear, splendid little boar!" said the boy, stroking the animal which—clump, clump!—ran down the stairs.

"Thank you too!" said the boar. "I helped you, and you helped me: I can move only when an innocent child sits upon me. Then I can even pass beneath the rays of the lamp burning before the image of the Madonna. With you I may enter everywhere, only not into a church! But looking inside through open doors is not forbidden to me! Do not dismount! If you dismount, I shall become just as dead and motionless as you saw me during the day in the alleyway of Porta Rossa."

"I will not leave you, dear boar!" said the boy, and they sped like a whirlwind through the streets to the square, to the church of Santa Croce.

The huge entrance doors opened; candles burned upon the altar, so that it was light both inside the church and even upon the deserted square.

From the funeral monument situated in the left aisle of the church streamed some extraordinary light, as though a halo formed of hundreds of thousands of moving stars surrounded it. Upon the monument adorned a coat of arms: a red ladder, as if blazing in fire, upon a blue field. That was the tomb of Galileo; it is very simple, yet the coat of arms is full of profound meaning. It could serve as the emblem of art or science themselves: for their representatives too are led to immortality by a blazing ladder; all prophets of art and science, marked by the gifts of the Spirit, ascend to heaven like the prophet Elijah.

The images placed upon the marble sarcophagi in the right aisle of the church seemed all to come alive. Here stood Michelangelo, there Dante with a laurel wreath upon his brow, here Alfieri, Machiavelli—everywhere great men, the pride of Italy (Not far from Galileo's tomb lies the tomb of Michelangelo; upon it are his bust and three allegorical figures: Sculpture, Painting, and Architecture. Beside it—the tomb of Dante (his body rests in Ravenna); upon it appears a figure of Italy pointing toward the colossal statue of Dante; here too Poetry mourns the loss she has suffered. Two steps away—the funeral monument of Alfieri, adorned with laurels, a lyre, and masks; above the grave Italy weeps. The tomb of Machiavelli completes this row of monuments to Italy's great men.—Author's note.). The church of Santa Croce is magnificent, far more beautiful, though not so large, as the marble Cathedral of Florence.

The folds of the marble garments stirred, and the images of the great men raised their heads and

They turned their gazes toward the shining altar, from where singing could be heard and where boys in snow-white garments censed with golden censers; a strong fragrance streamed from the church onto the square.

The boy stretched out his hand toward the bright radiance, but at that very moment the bronze boar galloped onward, and he had to cling tightly to the animal's neck. The wind whistled in his ears, the cathedral doors slammed shut with a shriek; then consciousness left the boy, a deadly cold seized his limbs, and—he opened his eyes.

It was already morning; he sat half-upright, half-lying down, having almost completely slipped off the boar's back, which stood, as always, in its usual place.

Horror seized the boy at the mere thought of her whom he called mother. She had sent him yesterday to beg for alms, but no one had given him anything; hunger tormented the poor child. Once more he embraced the boar, kissed it on the snout, nodded his head to it, and headed into one of the narrowest streets, where a laden donkey could barely pass. Then the boy entered through a half-open, iron-bound door and began climbing a dirty brick staircase with a rope instead of a railing. The stairs led to an open gallery hung all over with rags; from the gallery another staircase descended into the courtyard; in the middle of the courtyard stood a well, from which thick iron wires ran to every floor, and along them buckets of water moved constantly; the winch creaked, and water from the buckets splashed onto the courtyard pavement. Up a narrow, half-collapsed brick ladder the boy climbed even higher; meeting him, two Russian sailors came cheerfully running down the steps and nearly knocked the lad off his feet. They were returning from a merry

nighttime revel; behind them walked a woman no longer young, but strongly built, with thick black hair.

"Did you bring much?" she asked the boy.

"Don't be angry!" he pleaded. "No one gave me anything!"

And he grabbed the edge of his mother's dress, as if wishing to kiss it. They entered the room; we shall not describe it; it will suffice to say that there stood an earthen pot with hot coals—a warming pan, or *marito*, as they call it in Italy. The woman took it and began warming her hands.

"Did you bring something after all?" she asked, nudging the boy with her elbow.

The child began to cry; she gave him a kick with her foot; he let out a loud wail.

"Be quiet, or I'll smash your noisy head!" she said and raised the warming pan against him.

With a cry the boy threw himself to the ground. The door opened, and a neighbor entered, also holding a warming pan in her hands.

"Felicità! What are you doing to the child?"

"He's my child!" replied Felicità. "I can kill him if I wish, and you too, Gianina!"

And she swung the warming pan. The neighbor raised hers in defense, and the pots collided—shards, coals, and ash flew all over the room, while the boy—out the door, into the courtyard and onto the street! The poor child ran until he was out of breath and involuntarily stopped at the church of Santa Croce, the very one he had visited that night. The whole church gleamed with lights; he entered, fell to his knees beside the first tomb on the right—it was the tomb of Michelangelo—and burst into loud sobs. People came and went, mass had ended, no one paid attention to the boy; only some elderly townsman paused briefly to look at him, but then he too went on his way like the others.

The child, utterly exhausted from hunger and thirst, crawled into a corner between the wall and the marble tomb and fell asleep. He woke only toward evening—someone shook him; he stood up and saw before him that same old man.

"Are you unwell? Where do you live? Have you been here all day?" he bombarded the boy with questions.

The boy answered, and the old man led him to a small house on one of the side streets not far from the church. They entered a glovemaking workshop: an elderly woman sewed diligently, and before her on the table hopped a little white

Bolognese dog, clipped so short that its pink body showed through its fur. The dog rushed to the boy.

"Innocent souls quickly recognize each other!" said the woman, stroking both the dog and the child.

Kind people, having fed and given drink to the boy, allowed him to spend the night with them, and the next day Uncle Giuseppe intended to speak with the boy's mother.

The child was laid upon a small, poor bed, but it seemed princely to him: he was accustomed to spending nights on the hard stones of the pavement. He fell asleep peacefully and dreamed of luxurious paintings and the bronze boar.

In the morning Uncle Giuseppe left, and the poor little boy grew sad: it would end with him being taken back to his mother! And he cried, kissing the lively little white dog, while the kind woman nodded gently to them both.

Well, what did Uncle Giuseppe return with? He conversed long with his wife; she nodded approvingly and stroked the boy on the head, saying:

"What a lovely boy! He will make a fine glovemaker, no worse than you! He has such slender, flexible fingers! He was destined by the Madonna herself to be a glovemaker!"

And the boy remained with them. The glovemaker's wife taught him to sew; they fed him well, he slept excellently, and became a cheerful, lively boy who did not mind sometimes playing tricks and teasing Bellissima—that was the dog's name; but the mistress would threaten him with her finger, scold and grow angry, which greatly distressed the boy. Once he sat, lost in thought, in his little room where hides were dried; the windows facing the street were barred with thick grilles; the boy could not sleep: the bronze boar would not leave his mind, and suddenly he heard on the street: thump! thump! That must be the boar! The boy rushed to the window, but the street was already empty.

"Help the gentleman, take the box of paints!" said the mistress one morning upon seeing a young neighbor-artist dragging a box and a canvas rolled onto a stick.

The boy took the box and followed the artist. They went to the picture gallery and ascended the very staircase the boy remembered so well from that night when he rode the boar; he recognized all the statues and paintings, the wonderful marble Venus, the Madonna, Jesus, and John.

Here they stopped before a painting by Bronzino, depicting Christ descending into hell and surrounded by smiling children firmly believing in their salvation; the poor boy too glowed entirely with a smile—he himself felt as though in heaven.

"Well, off you go!" said the artist, who had already set up his easel.

"May I not watch how you transfer the painting here, onto this white canvas?" said the boy.

"I am not yet going to paint with colors!" replied the artist and took a charcoal pencil.

His hand moved swiftly, his eyes fixed upon the large painting, and despite making only fine strokes, the same airy image of Christ appeared on his canvas as in the oil painting.

"Well, off you go then!" said the artist again, and the boy quietly trudged home, sat at the table, and began to learn... to sew gloves.

But his thoughts flew to the picture gallery, he pricked his fingers with the needle, the work did not progress, yet he no longer teased Bellissima either. In the evening the boy slipped through the open door onto the street; it was cold, but wonderful clear stars shone in the sky. He ran through the silent streets straight to the bronze boar, bent down to it, kissed its shining snout, then sat upon its back and said:

"How I have missed you, dear boar! We must ride again tonight!"

The bronze boar did not move; from its mouth still flowed a stream of pure, fresh water. The boy sat upon it exactly like a rider on a horse, when suddenly someone tugged at the edge of his dress. He looked and saw Bellissima, little, naked Bellissima! The dog too had unnoticed slipped through the door and followed the boy. Bellissima yapped as if wanting to tell the boy: "I'm here too! And where have you gone?" Had a fiery dragon appeared before the boy, the poor fellow would not have feared it more than Bellissima. Bellissima in the street and "not dressed!" as the mistress would say. What would happen now?! In winter the dog was never let out of the house without a warm sheepskin coat specially sewn for her. The sheepskin was adorned with little bells and bows, and was tied around her neck and under her belly with red ribbons. Accompanying her mistress on walks in such attire, the dog resembled a little lamb trotting on its legs.

"Bellissima is here, and undressed! What will happen now?" All his dreams shattered; the boy kissed the bronze boar, scooped up Bellissima—the poor thing was shivering from the cold—and ran home as fast as his legs could carry him.

"What do you have there? Where are you running?" shouted two gendarmes who happened to meet him on the way; Belissima barked.

"Where did you steal such a pretty little dog?" they asked, taking her away from the boy.

"Oh, give me back my dog!" the little boy begged.

"If you didn't steal her, tell someone at home to come for her at the guardhouse."

And they left with Belissima.

What misery! What was he to do: throw himself into the Arno or go home and confess? His masters would surely beat him to death! "Well, let them; I want to die myself; then I shall go to Jesus and the Madonna!" And he went home, chiefly in order to die.

The door was locked; he could not reach the door knocker; there was not a soul in the street, but a cobblestone lay on the pavement, and the boy began pounding it against the door.

"Who's there?" a voice called out.

"It's me!" he said. "Belissima is gone! Open the door and beat me to death."

An uproar arose; especially frightened for the poor dog was the mistress; she immediately looked at the wall where the dog's little coat hung: the sheepskin was still in its place.

"Belissima is at the guardhouse!" she cried out. "Oh, you wicked boy! How did you lure her away? She will freeze! Such a delicate little creature in the rough hands of soldiers!"

And Uncle Giuseppe had to go fetch the dog. The mistress moaned, and the boy wept; all the neighbors gathered, and the artist came too. He drew the little boy to himself, began asking how it had happened, and piece by piece, in fragments and snatches, learned the whole story about the bronze boar and the picture gallery. It was not easy at first to understand the little boy.

The artist comforted the boy and stood up for him before the old woman, but she calmed down only when Uncle Giuseppe returned with Belissima, who had been with the soldiers. What joy there was! The artist caressed the poor little boy and gave him a whole stack of pictures.

The pictures were wonderful, extremely funny! Especially good was the bronze boar—quite as if alive! Nothing could be better than that! The artist made a few

strokes with his pencil, and on the paper appeared the bronze boar, and not only him, but also the house standing behind him!

"If only I could draw and paint like that! The whole world would become mine! Everything could be transferred onto paper!"

The next day, seizing a moment when he was alone, the boy grabbed a pencil and tried to copy the boar on the back of one of the pictures. It worked! A little crooked, a little askew, one leg thicker than the other, but still one could guess that it was the bronze boar.

The boy rejoiced! True, the pencil still obeyed him poorly—he noticed this quite well. But the next day, beside the first bronze boar stood another; this one was already a hundred times better, and the third was so good that anyone would immediately recognize whom it had been copied from.

Meanwhile, glove-sewing went badly, and various small errands for the masters were performed poorly and slowly. Thanks to the bronze boar, the boy learned that any picture could be transferred onto paper, and the city of Florence was a real album, just keep turning its pages! In the Piazza della Trinità stands a slender column; at its very top is the goddess of justice, blindfolded and holding scales in her hands; soon she too found her way onto paper, transferred there by the glover's apprentice. His collection of drawings kept growing, but so far these were all images of inanimate objects. Once Belissima jumped before him, and he said to her:

"Stand still! You'll see what a pretty picture you will make!"

Belissima, however, did not want to stand still, and so she had to be tied up. But even tied by her tail and by her head, she continued jumping and barking; the string had to be tightened properly. Suddenly the lady entered.

"You godless boy! Poor doggie!"—that was all she could utter.

Then she pushed the boy away, gave him a kick, and drove the ungrateful godless wretch out of the house, covering the poor, half-strangled Belissima with kisses and tears.

At that very moment, the artist was ascending the stairs, and—here is the turning point of our story.

In 1834, there was an exhibition at the Florentine Academy of Arts. Two paintings, placed side by side, attracted crowds of viewers. The smaller painting depicted a cheerful little boy copying a small white short-haired dog.

Evidently, the model did not wish to stand still and therefore had been tied to the table by her tail and head with a string. Life bubbled forth in this painting, and everyone was delighted by it. The painting belonged, as people said, to the brush of a young Florentine, found somewhere on the street as a child, raised by an old glover, and self-taught in drawing. One now-famous artist had accidentally discovered his talent when the little boy was being driven from the house because, wishing to copy his mistress's favorite dog, he had tied her up and nearly strangled her.

From a glover's apprentice grew a great artist—this was evidenced both by the aforementioned painting, and especially by the larger one standing beside it. It contained only one figure: a lovely ragged little boy sleeping soundly, seated upon the bronze boar from the Port Rossa alley (The Bronze Boar is a copy; the original is marble and stands in the Palazzo degli Uffizi Gallery.—Author's note).

This place was well known to all the viewers. The boy's hands rested upon the boar's head. The dear pale childish face was brightly illuminated by rays from a lamp hanging before an icon of the Madonna. The painting was wonderful! Upon the corner of the magnificent golden frame hung a laurel wreath, but among the green leaves wound a black ribbon and black crape.

The young artist had died shortly before.