

The Metal Pig

Hans Christian Andersen

In the city of Florence, not far from the Piazza del Granduca, there is a little cross street which I think is called Porta Rossa. In front of a sort of market in this street, where vegetables are sold, stands an artificial but beautifully fashioned metal pig. A fountain of fresh clear water gushes out of the animal's mouth. Age has turned it dark green; only its snout shines as if it had been polished, and so it has by the many hundreds of children and poor people who take hold of it with their hands when they put their mouths to its mouth to drink the water. It is an interesting picture to see the perfectly formed animal embraced by a handsome, half-naked boy putting his young lips to its snout.

Everyone who goes to Florence surely finds the place; you only have to ask the first beggar you see about the metal pig, and he will find it for you.

Late one winter evening the mountains were covered with snow, but it was moonlight, and in Italy the moon gives as bright a light as on a dark winter's day in the north. Yes, it is even brighter, for the clear air seems to shine and to lift us above the earth, while in the north the cold, gray leaden roof presses us to the ground, the same cold, wet ground which one day will press on our coffins.

In the Duke's palace garden, a little ragged boy had been sitting all day under the stone pines, where thousands of roses bloom in the winter, a boy who might have stood for a picture of Italy, so pretty, so laughing, and yet so suffering. Although hungry and thirsty, he got a penny from no one, and when it grew dark and time to close the gardens, the porter drove him away. For a long time he stood dreaming on the bridge over the River Arno, looking at the reflections of the glittering stars in the water beneath the stately marble bridge. Then he made his way to the metal pig, knelt before it, threw his arms around its neck, put his little mouth to its shining snout, and drank great draughts of fresh water. Near by lay a few salad leaves and a couple of chestnuts, and these formed his supper. There was no living soul in the street; he was all alone; he climbed on to the metal pig's back, leaned forward so that his little curly head rested on the animal's head, and before he knew what was happening he had fallen fast asleep.

It was midnight. The metal pig moved. The boy heard it say quite plainly, "Hold fast, little boy, for now I'm going to run off!" And away it ran with him!

It was a strange ride. First they reached the Piazza del Granduca, and the bronze horse on which the Duke's statue was mounted neighed loudly to them. The colored coats of arms on the old Town Hall glowed like transparent pictures, and Michelangelo's *David* hurled his sling; it was a curious form of life that moved about. The bronze groups of *Perseus* and the *Rape of the Sabine Women* were only too much alive; their death shriek resounded through the stately deserted Piazza. The metal pig stopped by the Uffizi Palace, under the arcade where the nobles assembled for the carnival celebration during Lent.

"Hold fast," said the animal. "Hold fast now, for I'm going up the stairs!"

The little fellow hadn't yet said a word; he was half frightened, half delighted. They entered a long gallery, which he knew well, for he had been there before. The walls were covered with pictures, and the statues and busts all stood in a light as bright as if it were day; but the most splendid sight of all was when the door to one of the adjoining rooms opened. Yes, the splendor here the little boy remembered, but tonight everything was especially magnificent.

Here stood the statue of a nude woman, as beautiful as only nature and the greatest

marble sculptor could make her; she moved her lovely limbs, dolphins sprang to life at her feet, and immortality shone from her eyes. She is known to the world as the *Venus de' Medici*. Marble statues of superb men were grouped around her; one of them, the *Grinder*, was sharpening his sword; the next group was the *Wrestling Gladiators*. The sword was whetted, and the athletes wrestled for the goddess of beauty.

The boy was dazzled by the magnificence; the walls were radiant with color, and everything there had life and movement. The picture of Venus, the earthly Venus, impassioned and glowing life, as Titian saw her, shone in redoubled splendor. Near her were the portraits of two lovely women, reclining on soft cushions, with beautiful, unveiled limbs, heaving bosoms, and luxuriant locks falling over rounded shoulders, while their dark eyes betrayed passionate thoughts. But none of these pictures dared to step forth from their frames. The goddess of beauty herself, the *Gladiators*, and the *Grinder* remained on their pedestals, subdued by the halo around the Madonna, with the infants Jesus and St. John. The holy pictures were no longer just pictures; they were the saints themselves.

What brilliance and beauty as they passed from gallery to gallery! And the little boy saw everything, for the metal pig went step by step past all this glory and magnitude. Each sight crowded out the previous one; only one picture really took hold of his thoughts, and that was chiefly because of the happy children in it; once during the daytime the little boy had nodded to them.

Many probably pass this picture unnoticed, yet it contains the essence of poetry. It is Christ descending to Hell, but He is not surrounded by souls in torment; no, these are heathen. The painting is by the Florentine Agnolo Bronzino. The expression of the children's faces is most beautiful in their certainty that they are going to Heaven. Two little ones are already embracing each other; one stretches a hand out to a companion below, and points to himself as if to say, "I am going to Heaven!" All the older people stand around doubting, or hoping, or humbly bowing in prayer to the Lord Jesus.

The boy gazed longer at this picture than at any of the others; and as the metal pig rested quietly before it, a gentle sigh was heard. Did it come from the picture, or from the breast of the animal? The boy stretched out his own hand toward the smiling children; and then the animal galloped off with him, galloped away through the long gallery.

"Thank you, and bless you, you beautiful animal!" said the little boy, patting the pig as it went bump, bump, bump down the stairs with him.

"Thank you, and blessings to you, too!" said the metal pig. "I've helped you, but you've helped me, because I only have the strength to run when I'm carrying an innocent child on my back! You see, now I even dare step under the rays of the lamp before the Madonna picture. I can carry you anywhere except into a church, but as long as you're with me I can stand outside and look in through the open door. Don't get down off my back! If you do I shall be dead, just as you see me every day in the Porta Rossa!"

"I'll stay with you, my blessed animal," said the little boy, and then they rushed at a dizzy pace through the streets of Florence to the church of Santa Croce in the Piazza. The great folding door swung open, and the altar lights streamed through the church and out into the deserted Piazza.

A strange light blazed from a sculptured tomb in the left aisle; thousands of twinkling stars formed a sort of halo around it. The tomb was surmounted by a coat of arms, a red ladder on blue ground, gleaming like fire. This was the tomb of Galileo. It is a simple monument; but the red ladder on the blue ground is a symbol of Art, meaning that the pathway to fame is always upward on a flaming ladder. All genius soars to Heaven like the prophet Elijah.

Every statue on the costly sarcophagus in the right aisle of the church seemed endowed with life. Here were Michelangelo and Dante, with the laurel wreath on his brow; Alfieri and

Macchiavelli rested here side by side - the pride of Italy. It is a very beautiful church, far more beautiful than, although not as large as, the marble Cathedral of Florence.

It seemed as if the marble raiment moved, as if those great figures once more raised their heads in the night, mid song and music, and gazed toward the altar glowing with many lights, where the white-robed altar boys swung the golden censers, while the fragrance of incense filled the church and streamed out into the open square.

The boy stretched his hands toward the lights, but at that moment the metal pig galloped on again, and he had to hold tightly. The wind whistled in his ears, and he heard the church door creak on its hinges as it closed. But immediately he seemed to lose consciousness, and felt an icy coldness - and then opened his eyes.

It was morning, and he had half slipped from the metal pig, which stood in its usual place in the Porta Rossa. Fright and terror seized the boy as he thought of the woman he called mother. Yesterday she had sent him out to get money, and he had none; he was hungry and thirsty. Once more he flung his arms around the metal pig's neck, kissed its snout, nodded to it, and walked off to one of the narrowest streets, which was only wide enough for a heavily laden ass. A big iron-studded door stood half open; he entered it and mounted a brick staircase, with dirty walls and a greasy rope for a handrail, until he reached an open gallery hung with rags. A flight of steps led into a courtyard with a fountain, from which water was drawn up to the different floors by means of a thick iron wire, with buckets hung side by side. Sometimes the pulley jerked, and the buckets danced in the air and splashed water all over the courtyard. Another dilapidated brick staircase led still higher, and two sailors, who were Russians, ran merrily down and almost upset the poor boy. A strongly built woman with thick black hair, though no longer young, followed them.

"What have you brought home?" she said to the boy.

"Don't be angry!" he begged, catching hold of her dress as if to kiss it. "I haven't got anything at all! Nothing at all!"

They passed on into an inner room. We need not describe it, but will only say that in it was an earthen pot, with handles for holding charcoal, called a "*marito*." She hung this on her arm to warm her fingers, and pushed the boy away from her with her elbow. "Of course you have some money!" she said.

The child began to sob, and she kicked him with her foot, making him cry more loudly. "Will you be quiet, or I'll break your yelling head!" she said and swung the pot which she held in her hand. The boy ducked to the ground and screamed.

Then a neighbor woman came in, also with her *marito* on her arm. "Felicita!" she said. "What are you doing to that child?"

"The child is mine!" replied Felicita. "And I can murder him if I want to, and you too, Giannina!"

And she swung her fire pot again. The other woman raised hers to parry the blow, and the two pots clashed together, smashing to bits and scattering fire and ashes all over the room.

But the boy by that time was out of the door, across the courtyard, and out of the house. The poor child ran until he had no breath left. At last he stopped before the church of Santa Croce, whose great door had opened to him last night, and he went inside. Everything there was bright. He knelt by the first tomb, the sepulcher of Michelangelo, and began to cry loudly. People passed to and fro; Mass was celebrated; yet, nobody paid attention to the boy except one elderly citizen, who paused and looked at him for a moment, then passed on like the rest. The poor child became faint and ill, overcome with hunger and thirst. At last he crept into a corner behind the marble monument and fell

asleep.

Toward evening he was awakened by someone shaking him, and when he started up he saw the same elderly citizen standing before him. "Are you ill? Where is your home? Have you been here all day?" were some of the questions the old man asked him.

He answered them, and the old man took him with him to a little house in a near-by side street. It was a glovemaker's shop they entered, and there they found a woman sitting busily sewing. A little white poodle, so closely clipped that one could see her pink skin, jumped on the table and bounced toward the little boy.

"The innocent souls soon make friends with each other!" said the woman, patting both the boy and dog.

These good people gave the boy something to eat and drink, and told him he could spend the night there. Next morning Father Giuseppe would go to speak to his mother. He had only a homely little bed that night, but it was a royal couch to the boy who had so often slept on hard stone floors, and he slept soundly and dreamed about the splendid pictures and the metal pig.

The next morning Father Giuseppe went out, and the poor boy was sorry to see him go, for he knew that he had gone to his mother, and that the boy himself might have to return home. He wept, and kissed the lively little dog, while the woman nodded at them both.

And what message did Father Giuseppe bring back? He talked to his wife for a long time, and she nodded and caressed the boy.

"He's a beautiful child," she said, "and he'll be a clever glovemaker, just like you. Look at his fingers, so delicate and flexible! Madonna intended him to be a glovemaker!"

And so the little boy stayed in that house, and the woman taught him to sew; he had plenty to eat and got plenty of sleep. He became quite gay, and one day he began to tease Bellissima, as the little dog was called. This angered the woman; she scolded him and shook her finger at him, and the boy took it to heart. He sat thoughtful in his little room, which faced the street, with thick iron bars outside its windows, for the skins were hung up there to dry. That night he couldn't sleep, for his head was full of the metal pig. Suddenly he heard a "scramble, scramble!" outside; yes, that must be the metal pig. He rushed to the window, but there was nothing to see.

"Help the *signor* carry his color box," said the mistress next morning when their young neighbor, the painter, came down carrying his color box and a huge roll of canvas. The child at once took up the box and followed the artist.

They made their way to the picture gallery, and climbed the stairs that he could remember so well from the night he rode the metal pig. He remembered all the statues, the beautiful marble Venus, and the painted pictures too. Again he gazed at the Madonna, with St. John and the infant Jesus. They stopped before the Bronzino picture of Christ standing in the underworld with the children around Him, smiling in their sweet certainty of heaven. The poor boy smiled too, for he was in his own heaven.

"Now you may go home," the painter said to him when the child still remained after his easel was set up.

"Can't I stay to watch the *signor* paint?" said the boy. "Can't I see you put the picture on the white canvas?"

"I'm not painting just yet," answered the artist as he took out a piece of charcoal. His hand moved swiftly as his eye rapidly measured the great picture; though he made only a few light strokes, the figure of Christ stood there, just as in the colored painting.

"You must go now," said the painter.

Then the boy wandered quietly home, sat down on the table, and resumed learning to sew gloves. But all day his thoughts were in the gallery, so he was awkward and pricked his fingers; but he didn't tease Bellissima. When evening came he found the house door open, and crept out; it was cold, but bright starlight, beautiful and clear. He wandered through the streets, where everything was quiet, until he found himself at the metal pig; then he bent over it, kissed its shining snout, and seated himself on its back.

"You blessed creature!" he said. "How I've longed for you! We must have another ride tonight!"

But the pig remained lifeless; only the fresh water spouted from its mouth. The little boy was still sitting astride it when he felt something tug at his trouser leg. He looked down and saw the clipped, naked, little Bellissima! The dog had crept out of the house and followed the boy without his noticing. Bellissima barked, as if trying to say, "What are you sitting up there for? Can't you see I'm with you?"

A fire-breathing dragon couldn't have frightened the boy more than the little dog at that spot. "Bellissima out in the streets and not dressed!" As the old lady would say, "What will come of that?"

For the dog never went out in the winter without a little sheepskin coat, especially cut and sewed for it. The skin could be fastened around the neck and body with a red ribbon and decorated with little red bows and jingling bells. When the dog went out in the winter, tripping along behind its mistress, it looked almost like a little kid. Now, here it was out in the cold without the coat - what would be the consequences? All his fancies quickly fled, yet he did stop to kiss the pig before climbing down and taking Bellissima in his arms. The dog shivered with cold, so the boy ran as fast as he could.

"What are you running away with there? demanded two gendarmes who stopped him, while Bellissima barked. "Where did you steal that beautiful dog?" they asked, as they took it away from him.

"Oh, please give her back to me!" cried the boy.

"If you didn't steal it, you can tell your people at home that they can get it at the police station." They gave him the address, and off they went with Bellissima.

This was a terrible state of affairs! He couldn't decide whether to jump into the Arno or go home and confess everything. They would surely kill him, he thought. "But I would gladly be killed; I will die, and then go to Jesus and the Madonna!" So he hurried home, almost hoping to be killed.

The door was locked; he couldn't reach the knocker, and there was no one in the street to help him. But a loose stone lay next to him, and picking it up, he hammered on the door with it. "Who's that?" said a voice from inside.

"It's I!" he said. "And Bellissima is lost! Let me in, and then kill me!"

This was frightening indeed, especially to his mistress, who was so fond of Bellissima. She quickly looked at the wall to see if the dog's coat hung in its place, and there the little sheepskin was.

"Bellissima at the police station!" she cried loudly. "You wicked child! Why did you take her out? She'll die of cold! That delicate little animal among all those big rough soldiers."

And Father Giuseppe had to rush off at once. His wife wailed, and the boy wept. Everyone in the house came to see what was going on, including the painter. He took the boy on his knee and questioned him, and gradually he learned the whole story of the metal pig and the picture gallery. It wasn't easy to understand, but the painter comforted the child and calmed the woman, though she wasn't happy until Giuseppe returned with Bellissima, who had been among the soldiers. Then there was great rejoicing, and the painter patted the

poor boy on the head, and gave him some pictures.

Oh, these were splendid. There were comical heads, but most important of all, the metal pig himself! Nothing could have been more wonderful! It was sketched in only a few strokes, but even the house behind it appeared clearly.

"Oh, if I could only draw and paint! I'd have the whole world before me!"

The next day, in the first lonely moment he had, the little boy found a pencil and, on the white side of one of the pictures, tried to copy the drawing of the metal pig, and he succeeded! It was a little crooked, a little one-sided, with one leg thick and the other thin, but it was recognizable, and it delighted him. The pencil wouldn't go as straight as it should, he realized. Next day another pig stood beside the first one, and this was a hundred times better; and the third one was so good anyone could tell what it represented.

But the glovemaking went badly, and he ran errands slowly; for he had learned from the metal pig that any picture may be put on paper, and the city of Florence is a complete picture book, if you only turn the leaves.

In the Piazza della Trinità stands a slender column, and on top of it stands the blindfolded Goddess of Justice with the scales in her hand. Soon she also stood on paper, and it was the little apprentice glovemaking who put her there. His collection grew, though they were still only copies of inanimate objects; but one day Bellissima came bouncing toward him. "Stand still!" he said. "I'll make a beautiful portrait of you to have among my pictures!"

But Bellissima wouldn't stand still, so he had to tie her up. He tied her head and tail, and Bellissima barked and jumped about, straining at the cord. Then the *signora* came in.

"You wicked boy! That poor animal!" was all she had time to say. She flung the boy aside, kicked him, called him the most ungrateful, worthless, and wicked child, and turned him out of the house; and crying, she kissed the little half-strangled Bellissima.

At that moment the painter came up the stairs and - but this is the turning point of the story.

In 1834 there was an exhibition in the Academy of Arts in Florence. Two paintings, hung side by side, attracted much attention from the public. The smaller of them showed a happy little boy sitting at a table drawing; his model was a closely clipped little white poodle that was tied with string by the head and tail because it wouldn't stand still. The painting was so animated and true to life that it couldn't fail to interest all the spectators. The painter was, it was said, a young Florentine who had been found in the streets when a little child, had been raised by an old glovemaking, and had taught himself to draw. A now famous artist had discovered his talent just as he was about to be turned out of the house for having tied up his mistress' beloved little poodle to be his model. The glover's boy had become a great painter, as the picture clearly showed. But the larger picture was a still greater proof of his genius. There was just a single figure in it, a handsome ragged boy leaning, fast asleep, against the metal pig of the Via Porta Rossa. All the spectators knew that spot very well. The child's arm rested on the pig's head, and he slept sweetly, with the lamp before the near-by Madonna throwing a strong light on his pale, handsome face. It was a beautiful picture. A large gilt frame surrounded it, and a wreath of laurel was fastened to one corner of it; but a black ribbon was entwined in the green leaves, and long, black streamers hung down from it. The young painter had just died!