

Tall Tuscan Tales

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By : Tuscanwanderer

Wayside tales collected while walking in Tuscany



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Tall Tuscan Tales

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TUSCAN WANDERWAYS

To BEPPE the WOODSMAN

who taught us the ancient Tuscan art of exaggerating the truth.

CHAPTER TWO - BEPPE'S WOODEN LEG

*Wonderful are the pictures the Florentine hills call up before the traveller's eye;
one fancies their ancient villas and woodland churches must rest upon ground in honour of
the ancient heathen gods of
the soil.*

It was late morning, hard upon the end of July, when we set out to find Beppe the woodsman, the Genius Loci, again. We chose the uncharted seasonal footpaths from the village of Ontani, bearing a rough course up to Monte Cereo where we hoped to see Beppe in his far-famed oakwood-and-stone hilltop dwelling.

We walked past a castle, towerhouses, farmsteads, and at the end of a stretch of outlying huts and hovels, past the *casa colonica* of a *contadino*, the underling-dweller of the count's lands, as the name implies. We walked through the dusty wayside hamlet of Caianello, which would suggest a Roman origin.

We stopped a sunken-cheeked peasant of no definable age, whom we chanced to encounter as he sauntered down to the local coffee shop in his Saturday afternoon finery, and who explained, with commendable Tuscan magnification, that the honour of the hamlet's foundation was to be attributed to an unknown founder, older than the Romans, though he did not in truth nominate Moses or Mars. He stated that Beppe could be found sooner or later somewhere on Monte Cereo if we looked hard enough.

Beyond the hamlet, we entered a wood and picked up the downhill run of a watercourse known as Erca, witnessing, in over thirty years of Tuscan wayfaring, a unique dramatic event of nature: a snake dropped from a high wayside hedge onto the footpath a few steps from us and attacked a small green lizard that had been idling on a stone drawing in heat from the sun. The lizard sprang forward along the path in time to avoid extinction, the snake giving vehement chase for some distance until they both disappeared into the high grass.

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The broken branches and soft, spongy leaves stacked up on the banks of the Erca by winter and spring spates made our upstream march treacherous and punishing. At the copse where we had filled our bottles with Anchise the contadino a few days ago, we spotted the dark-green neck of a straw-jacketed wine-flask sticking decorously out of the same small pool. On the bank beside the stream lay the body of a large man, fast asleep, his legs splayed out widely across the ground, the back of his head resting on a coarse cloth rucksack.

“ Beppe,” we chorused, “ good day!”

The woodsman woke up instantly, his eyebrows arching high at the sharp awakening.

Without a glance or a greeting, he sat up, reached into his rucksack, took out a bottle and put it to his lips to drink. His long white beard moved from side to side as he swished the water around in his mouth. He gargled with his head tilted back, turned it to one side and spouted the water out onto the ground. He promptly extended his thick, hairy arm towards the wine-flask, lifted it from the stream and drank jubilantly.

“ *Actum est!* A swig of restorative red wine in a clean mouth first thing in the morning! One of my many barbarous extravagances,” he explained. “ Iâ ve been asleep here since twilight yesterday. In Summer I sometimes just donâ t feel like trudging back home up to the top of Monte Cereo when I have to be in town again the following day. Here, have a drink!”

He led us to a wayside spring where a full swarm of Virgilian bees hummed around us. While he drank and splashed his face and neck with cold water, we had a few minutes to contemplate a woebegone nearby Madonna and Child shrine, where the chubby face of a cherub looked down at us with mock humility as one offering a prayer for burdened wayfarers with a long road behind and nowhere to go.

Beppe gesticulated with his finger stump. “ In bygone days, well, letâ s say until a few years ago, a place of worship like this offered corporal and spiritual refreshment and a meeting point for trivia where you could talk to a woodsman or a contadino with a loaf of bread under his arm, an onion in his hand, and the neck of a small wine-bottle peeping out of his pocket. Come! they're waiting for us down at the village.

Before we had reached our marble-topped table under the low, yellow-and-white striped awning in front of Bar Gino in Piazza della Chiesa at Ontani, Beppe had cupped his hands and shouted roughly in the direction of the counter.

“ Gino, didnâ t you see us walking over the piazza? Do I have to hee-haw like a donkey to catch your attention? Quit serving that multitude of hogs from the city banks you have in there and bring us wine, bread, prosciutto and a lump of that cheese that our shepherds Bernardo and Guido give you. And make it nimble!”

“ Why are you so disrespectful towards Gino?” we challenged, as we all sat down together at Beppe's command.

“ You see,” Beppe went on, brushing aside our question, “ the two brothers make the finest cheese on the hillside! He repeated his call for service. “ Gino! Iâ ll show you, you bucketful of lard!”

He stood up, walked over to the fountain behind us, and filled his cupped hands with ice-cold water, drank, splashed his beard and the back of his neck and wiped himself with a outsized green and yellow handkerchief.

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He took a burnished silver cigar box out of his shirt pocket, opened the lid, cautiously chose a full-length Toscanello cigar, struck a match along the right-hand side of the fountain and swaggered straight into the bar, pushing his way arrogantly through the bank employees and a group of stylish ladies from the city who were chatting and drinking coffee at the counter.

Beppe placed himself squarely in front of Gino and stalled him instantly with a vehement glare.

“A glass of wine! And without delay!”

Gino interrupted his service, took a wine-glass from the shelf, polished it to an exceptional degree of brilliance, filled it with local red wine and placed it on the counter.

With his right hand Beppe raised the glass to his lips and drank the wine in a single gulp. He took two steps back, held his arm straight out in front of him, turned the glass upside down, let it drop, and at knee height stopped it from crashing to the floor with his left hand by catching it in the stump of his chopped-off finger.

A crash of applause came from the woodsmen sitting at the tables in the corner. Revulsion was manifest on the faces from of the city.

“Now have I your attention?” he said to Gino as he left the counter and headed for our table.

Gino showed no sign of agitation. He nodded formally once more to his group of waiting customers, begging their pardon and then set about composing Beppe’s order. With great caution he selected three stout wine glasses from a shelf and cleaned each one as scrupulously as before until the glass twinkled. Within the next few seconds Gino was standing at our side bearing a tray with liberal helpings of bread, prosciutto, cheese and a flask of red wine.

Beppe eyed him with aloof amusement while he filled our glasses. “Well done, Gino, well done my dear friend. May our Madonna and Child of the Snows have mercy upon your soul and give you peace! We had better sit out here today and not at my private corner of the table in the bar. I see your house is already full of that city office scum. You may go now!”

Gino may no reply. As he had come, so he submissively returned to his place behind the counter ready to resume his unblemished service.

The woodsman now turned to us. “The best way to tell a story, I believe, is to put yourself into it, with the intervention of one’s own personality, but without ostentation. Technically speaking, Boccaccio kept himself out of his Decameron, but Dante in the first person walked through Hell up to Paradise. Bloated truths and venial falsehoods set in the irreconcilable paradoxes of life quicken and nurture the imagination.”

We nodded in a friendly manner.

He spoke again with the genial, melodious, Tuscan accent spoken today only by contadini in the isolated rural areas.

“Now tell me once more. What is it all about? What do you want to write in those ugly little black notebooks this time?”

While this dramatic composition between Beppe and Gino was being acted out at the counter, we had noticed a lean, curly-headed boy in his early teens prudently sauntering towards our table, his eyes full of admiration as he followed every movement made by the big woodsman. He was now standing within our

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reach.

“That’s it! Beppe called out to him, “In primis et ante omnia, draw up a chair and sit here in front of me and listen to a man talking! If you want to become a brawny and skilful woodsman like me, you have got to learn how to work the hardiness into your system. You get up early in the morning, you go into the woods and you start hacking and pounding all day until your knees hit the ground.”

Beppe impatiently drummed the marble-top with the stump of his chopped-off left forefinger. “Well, are you listening to me attentively?”

“Sì, signore.”

“You see,” he went on, looking over at the youngster with hard set eyes, “I live on the hilltop of Monte Cereo. Where do you live and who are you?”

“Grazie, signore,” my name is Geremia Ventari, my father’s name is

“Yes, yes, I know, Anchise, and your gracious mother is Anastasia.

The customary droning swarm of woodsmen and their wives had already drawn up their chairs around our little table, eager to pass their Saturday afternoon in the company of the latest inflated Tuscan tale. From the vibrant *personae* in the company surrounding us, Boccaccio could have taken any of his seven ladies and three men. And many of their stories too.

It was Beppe’s move. He had excogitated his prologue in the meantime and now waited for the right moment of silence to fall on his assembly.

“Well, you see,” he began, throwing an agile glance at the faces around him to establish eye-contact, “it is a renowned and incontrovertible fact, my dear Geremia, that I live up there on the top of our Paterfamilias, Monte Cereo, in Beppe’s Bastion, a embellished term for my oakwood-and-stone domicile.

A complimentary volley of laughter came from the woodsmen.

“That old windowless potato box tied to the ground with ropes so that it won’t blow away during thunderstorms,” broke in one of the company.

Beppe took a long draw on his Toscanello cigar and blew a thick stream of foul-smelling smoke in his direction to stun him.

“Up there on Monte Cereo, my dear Geremia, as I was saying, it is so steep and dangerous that I have to tether my chickens to an oak tree to prevent them from falling off the hillside.”

“Yes, I understand,” the youngster asserted in a wavering voice, fearing he had been too bold. “May I remain seated at the table?”

“And that’s not all, my boy,” Beppe went on, “in the devoted and heroic implementation of my duty as an Ontani woodsman, I have to use my brainpower too! Do you want a Thespian illustration?”

Geremia did not know what to expect. “Sì, signore” he ventured.

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“ Now as we all know, it is the *lex non scripta* of Ontani that in Bar Gino the corner seat of the long wooden table nearest the door is perpetually reserved for woodsman Beppe. That’s me. When I enter the bar any idiot inadvertently occupying that seat is obliged to stand up at once. Now I noticed when I was in there just now that there is swaggering, architect-looking type, perched on my private seat at the corner of my table. Now you just watch Beppe’s brainpower.”

He got up and limped painfully towards the doorway, leaning forward, clasping his right knee tightly in his hand. As he approached, the clattering shouts and thundering oaths of a gang of Ontani woodsmen at a table in the bar playing the card-game *briscola* faded to an delirious form of silence.

Beppe exaggerated his limp drastically as he drew closer to his table. The man seated at the corner was busy reading his newspaper, unaware of the danger at hand.

Gino stopped his service and stood motionless, waiting for trouble. The eyes of everyone in the bar were now fixed apprehensively on the two men.

“ You see, sir,” explained Beppe to the man behind the newspaper, exercising his best authoritative voice, “ it’s my leg, you know, my poor leg.”

The man lowered his newspaper and looked up at him bewildered.

“ My old leg,” Beppe continued to mock, “ you see, it happened during the war when I was a little boy. I was helping my poor mother in the fields when a German bomb exploded near us and a shrapnel, you know, mutilated me for life. It’s my wooden leg, you see.”

“ Oh, I’m so sorry,” said the man, standing to attention, “ I do apologize. Do please take my seat. I shall leave now.”

Beppe sat down at his private corner to the wild laughter and applause of his fellow-woodsmen.

Gino moved his lips but checked himself just before reaching a smile.

The big man winked at Geremia who was now standing in the doorway. The boy’s face was burnished with pride.

Beppe got up, took Geremia by the hand, and they joined us again. He filled the three wine-glasses on the table and once more called into the bar in his magisterial voice, ordering bread, wine, prosciutto, cheese and more glasses. At this, the woodsmen and their wives huddled even closer round our table. Gino appeared instantly at the doorway and dreamily approached us with a choice selection of local products.

“ Are you writing all these things down?” he asked us. “ Well, have you anything to say?”

We looked at each other, then at Geremia, and shook our heads. “ Please go on, Beppe.”

The woodsman’s face put on its most sombre mask. His voice became sardonically biblical and he drummed the table-top in a steady cadence with his finger stump, irritating the young boy who blinked to the rhythm of the beats. We all waited for the next gush of puffed up Tuscanism.

“ You see, Geremia,” advocated the big man, “ as the bible itself says, a man cannot stand under an olive-tree and expect to eat ripe figs, or stand in a rainstorm and open his mouth to a downpour of wine. Now I appreciate that all this is not easy to understand for a little boy like you, but your father knows all the things.”

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If you want to be an accomplished woodsman like me, this understanding of nature is imperative. Now tell me, what are you doing in town today, where are Anchise and Anastasia?

Geremia looked at him bashfully. "My father has gone to the restaurant with some chickens and eggs, just as he usually does."

"And your mother?"

"My mother and my brother and sister are sitting on the little wall behind the church. My mother says there is more passing trade there. She says people who never go to Mass are ashamed to be seen by Don Armando and so to get to the square they walk round the back of the church. This morning she has eight chickens to sell. I must leave now to help them."

Beppe stood up and we all followed suit. He dispersed the assembly of woodsmen and townsfolk who had come to hear him speak and threw a handful of coins into his empty wine-glass, repeating the boy's name to himself, "Geremia, Geremia."

He privately disclosed to us that he was on his way back up the hillside to the small cluster of forsaken houses, the Borghetto, where an old monk, Guntelmo, lives alone in parochial solitude.

"I'll tell him about you two," he said, "the poor old soul would be very happy to meet you. I'll ask my friend Bruno to come too, and invite that boy Geremia. Can you come tomorrow afternoon?"

We nodded.

He collected his course cloth rucksack and we watched him as he crossed the square towards the church where the local priest, Don Armando, head bent to the ground, was watering a row of flowerpots in front of the church door with a long plastic hose.

Beppe could not dodge the provocation. "Don't spoil those flowers, my reverend brother, with that heathenish pee-pee council water," he sniggered. "Use your holy patience and wait until the preternatural rainwater comes down directly from Paradise!"

The priest looked at him for a moment in pious resignation and returned his thwarted thoughts to his flowerpots.

Like Gino, Don Armando had never found the audacity to challenge Beppe ever since time began.

Contributed by Julian Frullani at <http://www.newitineraries.it>

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