

CHAPTER 5 - ANTONINA

Who that has been at Rome does not remember with delight the attractions of the Pincian Hill? Who, after toiling through the wonders of the dark, melancholy city, has not been revived by a visit to its shady walks, and by breathing its fragrant breezes? Amid the solemn mournfulness that reigns over declining Rome, this delightful elevation rises light, airy, and inviting, at once a refreshment to the body and a solace to the spirit. From its smooth summit the city is seen in its utmost majesty, and the surrounding country in its brightest aspect. The crimes and miseries of Rome seem deterred from approaching its favoured soil; it impresses the mind as a place set apart by common consent for the presence of the innocent and the joyful--as a scene that rest and recreation keep sacred from the intrusion of tumult and toil.

Its appearance in modern days is the picture of its character for ages past. Successive wars might dull its beauties for a time, but peace invariably restored them in all their pristine loveliness. The old Romans called it 'The Mount of Gardens'. Throughout the disasters of the Empire and the convulsions of the Middle Ages, it continued to merit its ancient appellation, and a 'Mount of Gardens' it still triumphantly remains to the present day.

At the commencement of the fifth century the magnificence of the Pincian Hill was at its zenith. Were it consistent with the conduct of our story to dwell upon the glories of its palaces and its groves, its temples and its theatres, such a glowing prospect of artificial splendour, aided by natural beauty, might be spread before the reader as would tax his credulity, while it excited his astonishment. This task, however, it is here unnecessary to attempt. It is not for the wonders of ancient luxury and taste, but for the abode of the zealous and religious Numerian, that we find it now requisite to arouse interest and engage attention.

At the back of the Flaminian extremity of the Pincian Hill, and immediately overlooking the city wall, stood, at the period of which we write, a small but elegantly built house, surrounded by a little garden of its own, and protected at the back by the lofty groves and outbuildings of the palace of Vetrano the senator. This abode had been at one time a sort of summer-house belonging to the former proprietor of a neighbouring mansion.

Profligate necessities, however, had obliged the owner to part with this portion of his possessions, which was purchased by a merchant well known to Numerian, who received it as a legacy at his friend's death. Disgusted, as soon as his reforming projects took possession of his mind, at the bare idea

of propinquity to the ennobled libertines of Rome, the austere Christian determined to abandon his inheritance, and to sell it to another; but, at the repeated entreaties of his daughter, he at length consented to change his purpose, and sacrifice his antipathy to his luxurious neighbours to his child's youthful attachment to the beauties of Nature as displayed in his legacy on the Pincian Mount. In this instance only did the natural affection of the father prevail over the acquired severity of the reformer. Here he condescended, for the first and the last time, to the sweet trivialities of youth. Here, indulgent in spite of himself, he fixed his little household, and permitted to his daughter her sole recreations of tending the flowers in the garden and luxuriating in the loveliness of the distant view.

* * * * *

The night has advanced an hour since the occurrence mentioned in the preceding chapter. The clear and brilliant moonlight of Italy now pervades every district of the glorious city, and bathes in its pure effulgence the groves and palaces on the Pincian Mount. From the garden of Numerian the irregular buildings of the great suburbs of Rome, the rich undulating country beyond, and the long ranges of mountains in the distance, are now all visible in the soft and luxurious light. Near the spot which commands this view, not a living creature is to be seen on a first examination; but on a more industrious and patient observation, you are subsequently able to detect at one of the windows of Numerian's house, half hidden by a curtain, the figure of a young girl.

Soon this solitary form approaches nearer to the eye. The moonbeams, that have hitherto shone only upon the window, now illuminate other objects. First they display a small, white arm; then a light, simple robe; then a fair, graceful neck; and finally a bright, youthful, innocent face, directed steadfastly towards the wide moon-brightened prospect of the distant mountains.

For some time the girl remains in contemplation at her window. Then she leaves her post, and almost immediately reappears at a door leading into the garden. Her figure, as she advances towards the lawn before her, is light and small--a natural grace and propriety appear in her movements--she holds pressed to her bosom and half concealed by her robe, a gilt lute. When she reaches a turf bank commanding the same view as the window, she arranges her instrument upon her knees, and with something of restraint in her manner gently touches the chords. Then, as if alarmed at the sound she has produced, she glances anxiously around her, apparently fearful of being overheard. Her large, dark, lustrous eyes have in them an

expression of apprehension; her delicate lips are half parted; a sudden flush rises in her soft, olive complexion as she examines every corner of the garden. Having completed her survey without discovering any cause for the suspicions she seems to entertain, she again employs herself over her instrument. Once more she strikes the chords, and now with a bolder hand. The notes she produces resolve themselves into a wild, plaintive, irregular melody, alternately rising and sinking, as if swayed by the fickle influence of a summer wind. These sounds are soon harmoniously augmented by the young minstrel's voice, which is calm, still, and mellow, and adapts itself with exquisite ingenuity to every arbitrary variation in the tone of the accompaniment. The song that she has chosen is one of the fanciful odes of the day. Its chief merit to her lies in its alliance to the strange Eastern air which she heard at her first interview with the senator who presented her with the lute. Paraphrased in English, the words of the composition would run thus:--

THE ORIGIN OF MUSIC

I.

Spirit, whose dominion reigns Over Music's thrilling strains, Whence
may be thy distant birth? Say what tempted thee to earth?

Mortal, listen: I was born In Creation's early years, Singing, 'mid the
stars of morn, To the music of the spheres.

Once as, within the realms of space, I view'd this mortal planet roll,
A yearning towards they hapless race, Unbidden, filled my seraph soul!

Angels, who had watched my birth, Heard me sigh to sing to earth;
'Twas transgression ne'er forgiv'n To forget my native Heav'n; So they
sternly bade me go-- Banish'd to the world below.

II.

Exil'd here, I knew no fears; For, though darkness round me clung,
Though none heard me in the spheres, Earth had listeners while I sung.

Young spirits of the Spring sweet breeze Came thronging round me,
soft and coy, Light wood-nymphs sported in the trees, And laughing
Echo leapt for joy!

Brooding Woe and writhing Pain Soften'd at my gentle strain;

Bounding Joy, with footstep fleet, Ran to nestle at my feet; While,
aroused, delighted Love Softly kiss'd me from above!

III.

Since those years of early time, Faithful still to earth I've sung;
Flying through each distant clime, Ever welcome, ever young!

Still pleas'd, my solace I impart Where brightest hopes are scattered
dead; 'Tis mine--sweet gift!--to charm the heart, Though all its other
joys have fled!

Time, that withers all beside, Harmless past me loves to glide;
Change, that mortals must obey, Ne'er shall shake my gentle sway;
Still 'tis mine all hearts to move In eternity of love.

As the last sounds of her voice and her lute died softly away upon the still night air, an indescribable elevation appeared in the girl's countenance. She looked up rapturously into the far, star-bright sky; her lip quivered, her dark eyes filled with tears, and her bosom heaved with the excess of the emotions that the music and the scene inspired. Then she gazed slowly around her, dwelling tenderly upon the fragrant flower-beds that were the work of her own hands, and looking forth with an expression half reverential, half ecstatic over the long, smooth, shining plains, and the still, glorious mountains, that had so long been the inspiration of her most cherished thoughts, and that now glowed before her eyes, soft and beautiful as her dreams on her virgin couch. Then, overpowered by the artless thoughts and innocent recollections which on the magic wings of Nature and Night came wafted over her mind, she bent down her head upon her lute, pressed her round, dimpled cheek against its smooth frame, and drawing her fingers mechanically over its strings, abandoned herself unreservedly to the reveries of maidenhood and youth.

Such was the being devoted by her father's fatal ambition to a lifelong banishment from all that is attractive in human art and beautiful in human intellect! Such was the daughter whose existence was to be one long acquaintance with mortal woe, one unvaried refusal of mortal pleasure, whose thoughts were to be only of sermons and fasts, whose action were to be confined to the binding up of strangers' wounds and the drying of strangers' tears; whose life, in brief, was doomed to be the embodiment of her father's austere ideal of the austere virgins of the ancient Church!

Deprived of her mother, exiled from the companionship of others of her age,

permitted no familiarity with any living being, no sympathies with any other heart, commanded but never indulged, rebuked but never applauded, she must have sunk beneath the severities imposed on her by her father, but for the venial disobedience committed in the pursuit of the solitary pleasure procured for her by her lute. Vainly, in her hours of study, did she read the fierce anathemas against love, liberty, and pleasure, poetry, painting, and music, gold, silver, and precious stones, which the ancient fathers had composed for the benefit of the submissive congregations of former days; vainly did she imagine, during those long hours of theological instruction, that her heart's forbidden longings were banished and destroyed--that her patient and childlike disposition was bowed in complete subserviency to the most rigorous of her father's commands. No sooner were her interviews with Numerian concluded than the promptings of that nature within us, which artifice may warp but can never destroy, lured her into a forgetfulness of all that she had heard and a longing for much that was forbidden. We live, in this existence, but by the companionship of some sympathy, aspiration, or pursuit, which serves us as our habitual refuge from the tribulations we inherit from the outer world. The same feeling which led Antonina in her childhood to beg for a flower-garden, in her girlhood induced her to gain possession of a lute.

The passion for music which prompted her visit to Vetrano, which alone saved her affections from pining in the solitude imposed on them, and which occupied her leisure hours in the manner we have already described, was an inheritance of her birth.

Her Spanish mother had sung to her, hour after hour, in her cradle, for the short time during which she was permitted to watch over her child. The impression thus made on the dawning faculties of the infant, nothing ever effaced. Though her earliest perception were greeted only by the sight of her father's misery; though the form which his despairing penitence soon assumed doomed her to a life of seclusion and an education of admonition, the passionate attachment to the melody of sound, inspired by her mother's voice--almost imbibed at her mother's breast--lived through all neglect, and survived all opposition. It found its nourishment in childish recollections, in snatches of street minstrelsy heard through her window, in the passage of the night winds of winter through the groves on the Pincian Mount, and received its rapturous gratification in the first audible sounds from the Roman senator's lute. How her possession of an instrument, and her skill in playing, were subsequently gained, the reader already knows from Vetrano's narrative at Ravenna. Could the frivolous senator have discovered the real intensity of the emotions his art was raising in his pupil's bosom while he taught her; could he have imagined how incessantly,

during their lessons, her sense of duty struggled with her love for music--how completely she was absorbed, one moment by an agony of doubt and fear, another by an ecstasy of enjoyment and hope--he would have felt little of that astonishment at her coldness towards himself which he so warmly expressed at his interview with Julia in the gardens of the Court. In truth, nothing could be more complete than Antonina's childish unconsciousness of the feelings with which Vetrano regarded her. In entering his presence, whatever remnant of her affections remained unwithered by her fears was solely attracted and engrossed by the beloved and beautiful lute. In receiving the instrument, she almost forgot the giver in the triumph of possession; or, if she thought of him at all, it was to be grateful for having escaped uninjured from a member of that class, for whom her father's reiterated admonitions had inspired her with a vague feeling of dread and distrust, and to determine that, now she had acknowledged his kindness and departed from his domains, nothing should ever induce her to risk discovery by her father and peril to herself by ever entering them again.

Innocent in her isolation, almost infantine in her natural simplicity, a single enjoyment was sufficient to satisfy all the passions of her age. Father, mother, lover, and companion; liberties, amusements, and adornments--they were all summed up for her in that simple lute. The archness, the liveliness, and the gentleness of her disposition; the poetry of her nature, and the affection of her heart; the happy bloom of youth, which seclusion could not all wither nor distorted precept taint, were now entirely nourished, expanded, and freshened--such is the creative power of human emotion--by that inestimable possession. She could speak to it, smile on it, caress it, and believe, in the ecstasy of her delight, in the carelessness of her self-delusion, that it sympathised with her joy. During her long solitudes, when she was silently watched in her father's absence by the brooding, melancholy stranger whom he had set over her, it became a companion dearer than the flower-garden, dearer even than the plains and mountains which formed her favourite view. When her father returned, and she was led forth to sit in a dark place among strange, silent people, and to listen to interminable declamations, it was a solace to think of the instrument as it lay hidden securely in her chamber, and to ponder delightedly on what new music of her own she could play upon it next. And then, when evening arrived, and she was left alone in her garden--then came the hour of moonlight and song; the moment of rapture and melody that drew her out of herself, elevated her she felt not how, and transported her she knew not whither.

But, while we thus linger over reflection on motives and examinations into character, we are called back to the outer world of passing interests and events by the appearances of another figure on the scene. We left Antonina

in the garden thinking over her lute. She still remains in her meditative position, but she is now no longer alone.

From the same steps by which she had descended, a man now advances into the garden, and walks towards the place she occupies. His gait is limping, his stature crooked, his proportions distorted. His large, angular features stand out in gaunt contrast to his shrivelled cheeks. His dry, matted hair has been burnt by the sun into a strange tawny brown. His expression is one of fixed, stern, mournful thought. As he steps stealthily along, advancing towards Antonina, he mutters to himself, and clutches mechanically at his garments with his lank, shapeless fingers. The radiant moonlight, falling fully upon his countenance, invests it with a livid, mysterious, spectral appearance: seen by a stranger at the present moment, he would have been almost awful to look upon.

This was the man who had intercepted Vetricano on his journey home, and who had now hurried back so as to regain his accustomed post before his master's return, for he was the same individual mentioned by Numerian as his aged convert, Ulpian, in his interview with the landholder at the Basilica of St. Peter.

When Ulpian had arrived within a few paces of the girl he stopped, saying in a hoarse, thick voice--

'Hide your toy--Numerian is at the gates!'

Antonina started violently as she listened to those repulsive accents. The blood rushed into her cheeks; she hastily covered the lute with her robe; paused an instant, as if intending to speak to the man, then shuddered violently, and hurried towards the house.

As she mounted the steps Numerian met her in the hall. There was now no chance of hiding the lute in its accustomed place.

'You stay too late in the garden,' said the father, looking proudly, in spite of all his austerity, upon his beautiful daughter as she stood by his side. 'But what affects you?' he added, noticing her confusion. 'You tremble; your colour comes and goes; your lips quiver. Give me your hand!'

As Antonina obeyed him, a fold of the treacherous robe slipped aside, and discovered a part of the frame of the lute. Numerian's quick eye discovered it immediately. He snatched the instrument from her feeble grasp. His astonishment on beholding it was too great for words, and for an instant he

confronted the poor girl, whose pale face looked rigid with terror, in ominous and expressive silence.

'This thing,' said he at length, 'this invention of libertines in my house--in my daughter's possession!' and he dashed the lute into fragments on the floor.

For one moment Antonina looked incredulously on the ruins of the beloved companion, which was the centre of all her happiest expectations for future days. Then, as she began to estimate the reality of her deprivation, her eyes lost all their heaven-born brightness, and filled to overflowing with the tears of earth.

'To your chamber!' thundered Numerian, as she knelt, sobbing convulsively, over those hapless fragments. 'To your chamber! Tomorrow shall bring this mystery of iniquity to light!'

She rose humbly to obey him, for indignation had no part in the emotions that shook her gentle and affectionate nature. As she moved towards the room that no lute was henceforth to occupy, as she thought on the morrow that no lute was henceforth to enliven, her grief almost overpowered her. She turned back and looked imploringly at her father, as if entreating permission to pick up even the smallest of the fragments at his feet.

'To your chamber!' he reiterated sternly. 'Am I to be disobeyed to my face?'

Without any repetition of her silent remonstrance, she instantly retired. As soon as she was out of sight, Ulpius ascended the steps and stood before the angered father.

'Look, Ulpius,' cried Numerian, 'my daughter, whom I have so carefully cherished, whom I intended for an example to the world, has deceived me, even thus!'

He pointed, as he spoke, to the ruins of the unfortunate lute; but Ulpius did not address to him a word in reply, and he hastily continued:--

'I will not sully the solemn offices of tonight by interrupting them with my worldly affairs. To-morrow I will interrogate my disobedient child. In the meantime, do not imagine, Ulpius, that I connect you in any way with this wicked and unworthy deception! In you I have every confidence, in your faithfulness I have every hope.'

Again he paused, and again Ulpus kept silence. Any one less agitated, less confiding, than his unsuspecting master, would have remarked that a faint sinister smile was breaking forth upon his haggard countenance. But Numerian's indignation was still too violent to permit him to be observed, and, in spite of his efforts to control himself, he again broke forth in complaint.

'On this night too, of all others,' cried he, 'when I had hoped to lead her among my little assembly of the faithful, to join in their prayers, and to listen to my exhortations--on this night I am doomed to find her a player on a pagan lute, a possessor of the most wanton of the world's vanities! God give me patience to worship this night with unwandering thoughts, for my heart is vexed at the transgression of my child, as the heart of Eli of old at the iniquities of his sons!'

He was moving rapidly away, when, as if struck with a sudden recollection, he stopped abruptly, and again addressed his gloomy companion.

'I will go by myself to the chapel to-night,' said he. 'You, Ulpus, will stay to keep watch over my disobedient child. Be vigilant, good friend, over my house; for even now, on my return, I thought that two strangers were following my steps, and I forebode some evil in store for me as the chastisement for my sins, even greater than this misery of my daughter's transgression. Be watchful, good Ulpus--be watchful!'

And, as he hurried away, the stern, serious man felt as overwhelmed at the outrage that had been offered to his gloomy fanaticism, as the weak, timid girl at the destruction that had been wreaked upon her harmless lute.

After Numerian had departed, the sinister smile again appeared on the countenance of Ulpus. He stood for a short time fixed in thought, and then began slowly to descend a staircase near him which led to some subterranean apartments. He had not gone far when a slight noise became audible at an extremity of the corridor above. As he listened for a repetition of the sound, he heard a sob, and looking cautiously up, discovered, by the moonlight, Antonina stepping cautiously along the marble pavement of the hall.

She held in her hand a little lamp; her small, rosy feet were uncovered; the tears still streamed over her cheeks. She advanced with the greatest caution (as if fearful of being overheard) until she gained the part of the floor still strewn with the ruins of the broken lute. Here she knelt down, and pressed each fragment that lay before her separately to her lips. Then hurriedly concealing a single piece in her bosom, she arose and stole quickly

away in the direction by which she had come.

'Be patient till the dawn,' muttered her faithless guardian, gazing after her from his concealment as she disappeared; 'it will bring to thy lute a restorer, and to Ulpus an ally!'