Chapter 8 - A Face in the Crowd

It is easy to northern people to rise early on Midsummer morning to see the dew on the grassy edge of the dusty pathway to notice the fresh shoots among the darker green of the oak and fir in the coppice, and to look over the gate at the shorn meadow, without recollecting that it is the Nativity of St John the Baptist.

Not so to the Florentine - still less to the Florentine of the fifteenth century: to him on that particular morning the brightness of the eastern sun on the Arno had something special in it; the ringing of the bells was articulate, and declared it to be the great summer festival of Florence, the day of San Giovanni.

San Giovanni had been the patron saint of Florence for at least eight hundred years - ever since the time when the Lombard Queen Theodolinda had commanded her subjects to do him peculiar honour; nay, says old Villani, to the best of his knowledge, ever since the days of Constantine the Great and Pope Sylvester, when the Florentines deposed their idol Mars, whom they were nevertheless careful not to treat with contumely; for while they consecrated their beautiful and noble temple to the honour of God and of the 'Beato Messere Santo Giovanni,' they placed old Mars respectfully on a high tower near the River Arno, finding in certain ancient memorials that he had been elected as their tutelar deity under such astral influences that if he were broken, or otherwise treated with indignity, the city would suffer great damage and mutation. But in the fifteenth century that discreet regard to the feelings of the Man-destroyer had long vanished: the god of the spear and shield had ceased to frown by the side of the Arno, and the defences of the Republic were held to lie in its craft and its coffers. For spear and shield could be hired by gold florins, and on the gold florins there had always been the image of San Giovanni.

Much good had come to Florence since the dim time of struggle between the old patron and the new: some quarrelling and bloodshed, doubtless, between Guelf and Ghibelline, between Black and White, between orthodox sons of the Church and heretic Paterini; some floods, famine, and pestilence; but still much wealth and glory. Florence had achieved conquests over walled cities, once mightier than itself, and especially over hated Pisa, whose marble buildings were too high and beautiful, whose masts were too much honoured on Greek and Italian coasts. The name of Florence had been growing prouder and prouder in all the courts of Europe, nay, in Africa itself, on the strength of purest gold coinage, finest dyes and textures, pre-eminent scholarship and poetic genius, and wits of the most serviceable sort for statesmanship and banking: it was a name so omnipresent that a Pope with a turn for epigram had called Florentines 'the fifth element.' And for this high destiny, though it

might partly depend on the stars and Madonna del Impruneta, and certainly depended on other higher Powers less often named, the praise was greatly due to San Glovanni, whose image was on the fair gold florins.

Therefore it was fitting that the day of San Giovanni - that ancient Church festival already venerable in the days of St Augustine - should be a day of peculiar rejoicing to Florence, and should be ushered in by a vigil duly kept in strict old Florentine fashion, with much dancing, with much street jesting, and perhaps with not a little stone-throwing and window-breaking, but emphatically with certain street sights such as could only be provided by a city which held in its service a clever Cecca, engineer and architect, valuable alike in sieges and in shows. By the help of Cecca, the very saints, surrounded with their almond-shaped glory, and floating on clouds with their joyous companionship of winged cherubs, even as they may be seen to this day in the pictures of Perugino, seemed, on the eve of San Giovanni to have brought their piece of the heavens down into the narrow streets, and to pass slowly through them, and, more wonderful still, saints of gigantic size, with attendant angels might be seen, not seated, but moving in a slow mysterious manner along the streets, like a procession of colossal figures come down from the high domes and tribunes of the churches. The clouds were made of good woven stuff, the saints and cherubs were unglorified mortals supported by firm bars, and those mysterious giants were really men of very steady brain, balancing themselves on stilts, and enlarged, like Greek tragedians, by huge masks and stuffed shoulders; but he was a miserably unimaginative Florentine who thought only of that - nay, somewhat impious, for in the images of sacred things was there not some of the virtue of sacred things themselves? And if, after that, there came a company of merry black demons well armed with claws and thongs, and other implements of sport, ready to perform impromptu farces of bastinadoing and clothes-tearing, why, that was the demons' way of keeping a vigil, and they, too, might have descended from the domes and the tribunes. The Tuscan mind slipped from the devout to the burlesque, as readily as water round an angle; and the saints had already had their turn, had gone their way, and made their due pause before the gates of San Giovanni, to do him honour on the eve of his festa. And on the morrow, the great day thus ushered in, it was fitting that the tributary symbols paid to Florence by all its dependent cities, districts, and villages, whether conquered, protected, or of immemorial possession, should be offered at the shrine of San Giovanni in the old octagonal church, once the cathedral and now the baptistery, where every Florentine had had the sign of the Cross made with the anointing chrism on his brow, that all the city, from the white-haired man to the stripling, and from the matron to the lisping child, should be clothed in its best to do honour to the great day, and see the great sight; and that again, when the sun

was sloping and the streets were cool, there should be the glorious race or Corso when the unsaddled horses, clothed in rich trappings, should run right across the city, from the Porta al Prato on the north-west, through the Mercato Vecchio, to the Porta Santa Croce on the south-east, where the richest of Palii, or velvet and brocade banners with silk linings and fringe of gold such as hecame a city that half-clothed the well-dressed world, were mounted on a triumphal car awaiting the winner or winner's owner.

And thereafter followed more dancing; nay, through the whole day, says an old chronicler at the beginning of that century, there were weddings and the grandest gatherings, with so much piping, music and song, with balls and feasts and gladness and ornament, that this earth might have been mistaken for Paradise!

In this year of 1492, it was, perhaps, a little less easy to make that mistake. Lorenzo the magnificent and subtle was dead, and an arrogant, incautious Piero was come in his room, an evil change for Florence, unless, indeed, the wise horse prefers the bad rider, as more easily thrown from the saddle, and already the regrets for Lorenzo were getting less predominant over the murmured desire for government on a broader basis, in which corruption might be arrested, and there might be that free play for everybody's jealousy and ambition, which made the ideal liberty of the good old quarrelsome, struggling times, when Florence raised her great buildings, reared her own soldiers, drove out would-be tyrants at the sword's point, and was proud to keep faith at her own loss. Lorenzo was dead, Pope Innocent was dying, and a troublesome Neapolitan succession, with an intriguing, ambitious Milan, might set Italy by the ears before long: the times were likely to be difficult. Still, there was all the more reason that the Republic should keep its religious festivals.

And Midsummer morning, in this year 1492, was not less bright than usual. It was betimes in the morning that the symbolic offerings to be carried in grand procession were all assembled at their starting-point in the Piazza della Signoria - that famous piazza, where stood then, and stand now, the massive turreted Palace of the People, called the Palazzo Vecchio, and the spacious Loggia, built by Orcagna - the scene of all grand State ceremonial. The sky made the fairest blue tent, and under it the bells swung so vigorously that every evil spirit with sense enough to be formidable, must long since have taken his flight; windows and terraced roofs were alive with human faces; sombre stone houses were bright with hanging draperies; the boldly soaring palace tower, the yet older square tower of the Bargello, and the spire of the neighbouring Badia, seemed to keep watch above; and below, on the broad polygonal flags of the piazza, was the glorious show of banners, and horses with rich trappings, and gigantic ceri, or

tapers, that were fitly called towers - strangely aggrandised descendants of those torches by whose faint light the Church worshipped in the Catacombs. Betimes in the morning all processions had need to move under the Midsummer sky of Florence, where the shelter of the narrow streets must every now and then be exchanged for the glare of wide spaces; and the sun would be high up in the heavens before the long pomp had ended its pilgrimage in the Piazza di San Giovanni.

But here, where the procession was to pause, the magnificent city, with its ingenious Cecca, had provided another tent than the sky; for the whole of the Piazza del Duomo, from the octagonal baptistery in the centre to the facade of the cathedral and the walls of the houses on the other sides of the quadrangle, was covered, at the height of forty feet or more, with blue drapery, adorned with well-stitched yellow lilies and the familiar coats of arms, while sheaves of many-coloured banners drooped at fit angles under this superincumbent blue - a gorgeous rainbow-lit shelter to the waiting spectators who leaned from the windows, and made a narrow border on the pavement, and wished for the coming of the show.

One of these spectators was Tito Melema. Bright, in the midst of brightness, he sat at the window of the room above Nello's shop, his right elbow resting on the red drapery hanging from the window-sill, and his head supported in a backward position by the right hand, which pressed the curls against his ear. His face wore that bland liveliness, as far removed from excitability as from heaviness or gloom, which marks the companion popular alike amongst men and women - the companion who is never obtrusive or noisy from uneasy vanity or excessive animal spirits, and whose brow is never contracted by resentment or indignation. He showed no other change from the two months and more that had passed since his first appearance in the weather-stained tunic and hose, than that added radiance of good fortune, which is like the just perceptible perfecting of a flower after it has drunk a morning's sunbeams. Close behind him, ensconced in the narrow angle between his chair and the window-frame, stood the slim figure of Nello in holiday suit, and at his left the younger Cennini - Pietro, the erudite corrector of proof-sheets, not Domenico the practical. Tito was looking alternately down on the scene below, and upward at the varied knot of gazers and talkers immediately around him, some of whom had come in after witnessing the commencement of the procession in the Piazza della Signoria. Piero di Cosimo was raising a laugh among them by his grimaces and anathemas at the noise of the bells, against which no kind of ear-stuffing was a sufficient barricade, since the more he stuffed his ears the more he felt the vibration of his skull; and declaring that he would bury himself in the most solitary spot of the Valdarno on a festa, if he were not condemned, as a painter, to lie in wait for the secrets of colour

that were sometimes to be caught from the floating of banners and the chance grouping of the multitude.

Tito had just turned his laughing face away from the whimsical painter to look down at the small drama going on among the checkered border of spectators, when at the angle of the marble steps in front of the Duomo, nearly opposite Nello's shop, he saw a man's face upturned towards him, and fixing on him a gaze that seemed to have more meaning in it than the ordinary passing observation of a stranger. It was a face with tonsured head, that rose above the black mantle and white tunic of a Dominican friar - a very common sight in Florence; but the glance had something peculiar in it for Tito. There was a faint suggestion in it, certainly not of an unpleasant kind. Yet what pleasant association had he ever had with monks? None. The glance and the suggestion hardly took longer than a flash of lightning.

'Nello!' said Tito, hastily, but immediately added, in a tone of disappointment, 'Ah, he has turned round. It was that tall, thin friar who is going up the steps. I wanted you to tell me if you knew aught of him?'

'One of the Frati Predicatori,' said Nello, carelessly; you don't expect me to know the private history of the crows.'

'I seem to remember something about his face,' said ' Tito. 'It is an uncommon face.'

'What? you thought it might be our Fra Girolamo? Too tall; and he never shows himself in that chance way.'

'Besides, that loud-barking 'hound of the Lord' is not in Florence just now,' said Francesco Cei, the popular poet: 'he has taken Piero de' Medici's hint, to carry his railing prophecies on a journey for a while.'

'The Frate neither rails nor prophesies against any man,' said a middle-aged personage seated at the other corner of the window; 'he only prophesies against vice. If you think that an attack on your poems, Francesco, it is not the Frate's fault.'

'Ah, he's gone into the Duomo now,' said Tito, who had watched the figure eagerly. 'No, I was not under that mistake, Nello. Your Fra Girolamo has a high nose and a large under-lip. I saw him once - he is not handsome; but this man . . .'

'Truce to your description!' said Cennini. 'Hark! see! Here come the horsemen and the banners. That standard,' he continued, laying his hand familiarly on Tito's shoulder, - 'that carried on the horse with white trappings - that with the red eagle holding the green dragon

between his talons. and the red lily over the eagle - is the Gonfalon of the Guelf party, and those cavaliers close round it are the chief officers of the Guelf party. That is one of our proudest banners, grumble as we may; it means the triumph of the Guelfs, which means the triumph of Florentine will, which means triumph of the popolani.'

'Nay, go on, Cennini,' said the middle-aged man, seated at the window, 'which means triumph of the fat popolani over the lean, which again means triumph of the fattest popolano over those who are less fat.'

'Cronaca, you are becoming sententious,' said the printer: 'Fra Girolamo's preaching will spoil you, and make you take life by the wrong handle. Trust me, your cornices will lose half their beauty if you begin to mingle bitterness with them; that is the maniera Tedesca which you used to declaim against when you came from Rome. The next palace you build we shall see you trying to put the Frate's doctrine into stone.'

'That is a goodly show of cavaliers,' said Tito, who had learned by this time the best way to please Florentines; 'but are there not strangers among them? I see foreign costumes. '

'Assuredly,' said Cennini; 'you see there the Orators from France, Milan, and Venice, and behind them are English and German nobles; for it is customary that all foreign visitors of distinction pay their tribute to San Giovanni in the train of that gonfalon. For my part, I think our Florentine cavaliers sit their horses as well as any of those cut-and-thrust northerners, whose wits lie in their heels and saddles; and for yon Venetian, I fancy he would feel himself more at ease on the back of a dolphin. We ought to know something of horsemanship, for we excel all Italy in the sports of the Giostra,' and the money we spend on them. But you will see a finer show of our chief men by-and-by, Melema; my brother himself will be among the officers of the Zecca.'

'The banners are the better sight,' said Piero di Cosimo, forgetting the noise in his delight at the winding stream of colour as the tributary standards advanced round the piazza. 'The Florentine men are so-so; they make but a sorry show at this distance with their patch of sallow flesh-tint above the black garments; but those banners with their velvet, and satin, and minever, and brocade, and their endless play of delicate light and shadow! - Va! your human talk and doings are a tame jest; the only passionate life is in form and colour.'

'Ay, Piero, if Satanasso could paint, thou wouldst sell thy soul to learn his secrets,' said Nello. 'But there is little likelihood of it, seeing the

blessed angels themselves are such poor hands at chiaroscuro, if one may judge from their capo-d'opera, the Madonna Nunziata.'

'There go the banners of Pisa and Arezzo,' said Cennini. 'Ay, Messer Pisano, it is no use for you to look sullen; you may as well carry your banner to our San Giovanni with a good grace. 'Pisans false, Florentines blind' - the second half of that proverb will hold no longer. There come the ensigns of our subject towns and signories, Melema; they will all be suspended in San Giovanni until this day next year, when they will give place to new ones.'

'They are a fair sight,' said Tito; 'and San Giovanni will surely be as well satisfied with that produce of Italian looms as Minerva with her peplos, especially as he contents himself with so little drapery. But my eyes are less delighted with those whirling towers, which would soon make me fall from the window in sympathetic vertigo.'

The 'towers' of which Tito spoke were a part of the procession esteemed very glorious by the Florentine populace: and being perhaps chiefly a kind of hyperbole for the all-efficacious wax taper, were also called ceri. But inasmuch as hyperbole is impracticable in a real and literal fashion, these gigantic ceri, some of them so large as to be of necessity carried on wheels, were not solid but hollow, and had their surface made not solely of wax, but of wood and pasteboard, gilded, carved, and painted, as real sacred tapers often are, with successive circles of figures - warriors on horseback, foot-soldiers with lance and shield, dancing maidens, animals, trees and fruits, and in fine, says the old chronicler, 'all things that could delight the eye and the heart;' the hollowness having the further advantage that men could stand inside these hyperbolic tapers and whirl them continually, so as to produce a phantasmagoric effect, which, considering the towers were numerous, must have been calculated to produce dizziness on a truly magnificent scale.

'Pestilenza!' said Piero di Cosimo, moving from the window, 'those whirling circles one above the other are worse than the jangling of all the bells. Let me know when the last taper has passed.'

'Nay, you will surely like to be called when the contadini come carrying their torches,' said Nello; 'you would not miss the country-folk of the Mugello and the Casentino, of whom your favourite Lionardo would make a hundred grotesque sketches.'

'No,' said Piero, resolutely, 'I will see nothing till the car of the Zecca comcs. I have seen clowns enough holding tapers aslant, both with and without cowls, to last me for my life.'

Here it comes, then, Piero - the car of the Zecca,' called out Nello, after an interval during which towers and tapers in a descending scale of size had been making their slow transit.

'Fediddio!' exclaimed Francesco Cei, 'that is a well-tanned San Giovanni! some sturdy Romagnole beggar-man, I'll warrant. Our Signoria plays the host to all the Jewish and Christian scum that every other city shuts its gates against, and lets them fatten on us like St Anthony's swine.'

The car of the Zecca or Mint, which had just rolled into sight, was originally an immense wooden tower or cero adorned aftcr the same fashion as the other tributary ceri, mounted on a splendid car, and dravn by two mouse-coloured oxen, whose mild heads looked out from rich trappings bearing the arms of the Zecca. But the latter half of the century was getting rather ashamed of the towers with their circular or spiral paintings, which had delighted the eyes and the hearts of the other half, so that they had become a contemptuous proverb, and any ill-painted figure looking, as will sometimes happen to figures in the best ages of art, as if it had been boned for a pie, was called a fantoccio da cero, a tower-puppet; consequently improved taste, with Cecca to help it, had devised for the magnificent Zecca a triumphal car like a pyramidal catafalque, with ingenious wheels warranted to turn all corners easily. Round the base were living figures of saints and angels arrayed in sculpturesque fashion; and on the summit, at the height of thirty feet well bound to an iron rod and holding an iron cross also firmly infixed, stood a living representative of St John the Baptist, with arms and legs bare, a garment of tiger-skins about his body, and a golden nimbus fastened on his head - as the Precursor was wont to appear in the cloisters and churches, not having yet revealed himself to painters as the brown and sturdy boy who made one of the Holy Family. For where could the image of the patron saint be more fitly placed than on the symbol of the Zecca? Was not the royal prerogative of coining money the surest token that a city had won its independence? and by the blessing of San Giovanni this 'beautiful sheepfold' of his had shown that token earliest among the Italian cities. Nevertheless, the annual function of representing the patron saint was not among the high prizes of public life; it was paid for with something like ten shillings, a cake weighing fourteen pounds, two bottles of wine, and a handsome supply of light eatables; the money being furnished by the magnificent Zecca, and the payment in kind being by peculiar 'privilege' presented in a basket suspended on a pole from an upper window of a private house, whereupon the eidolon of the austere saint at once invigorated himself with a reasonable share of the sweets and wine, threw the remnants to the crowd, and embraced the mighty cake securely with his right arm through the remainder of his passage. This was the attitude in which the mimic San Giovanni presented himself as the tall car jerked and

vibrated on its slow way round the piazza to the northern gate of the Baptistery.

'There go the Masters of the Zecca, and there is my brother - you see him, Melema?' cried Cennini, with an agreeable stirring of pride at showing a stranger what was too familiar to be remarkable to fellow-citizens. 'Behind come the members of the Corporation of Calimara, the dealers in foreign cloth, to which we have given our Florentine finish; men of ripe years, you see, who were matriculated before you were born; and then comes the famous Art of Money-changers.'

'Many of them matriculated also to the noble art of usury before you were born,' interrupted Francesco Cei, 'as you may discern by a certain fitful glare of the eye and sharp curve of the nose which manifest their descent from the ancient Harpies, whose portraits you saw supporting the arms of the Zecca. Shaking off old prejudices now, such a procession as that of some four hundred passably ugly men carrying their tapers in open daylight, Diogenes-fashion, as if they were looking for a lost quattrino, would make a merry spectacle for the Feast of Fools.'

'Blaspheme not against the usages of our city,' said Pietro Cennini, much offended. 'There are new wits who think they see things more truly because they stand on their heads to look at them, like tumblers and mountebanks, instead of keeping the attitude of rational men. Doubtless it makes little difference to Maestro Vaiano's monkeys whether they see our Donatello's statue of Judith with their heads or their tails uppermost.'

'Your solemnity will allow some quarter to playful fancy, I hope,' said Cei, with a shrug, 'else what becomes of the ancients, whose example you scholars are bound to revere, Messer Pietro? Life was never anything but a perpetual see-saw between gravity and jest.'

'Keep your jest then till your end of the pole is uppermost,' said Cennini, still angry, 'and that is not when the great bond of our Republic is expressing itself in ancient symbols, without which the vulgar would be conscious of nothing beyond their own petty wants of back and stomach, and never rise to the sense of community in religion and law. There has been no great people without processions, and the man who thinks himself too wise to be moved by them to anything but contempt, is like the puddle that was proud of standing alone while the river rushed by.'

No one said anything after this indignant burst of Cennini's till he himself spoke again.

'Hark! the trumpets of the Signoria: now comes the last stage of the show, Melema. That is our Gonfaloniere in the middle, in the starred mantle, with the sword carried before him. Twenty years ago we used to see our foreign Podesta, who was our judge in civil causes, walking on his right hand; but our Republic has been over-doctored by clever Medici. That is the Proposto of the Priori on the left; then come the other seven Priori; then all the other magistracies and officials of our Republic. You see your patron the Segretario?'

'There is Messer Bernardo del Nero also,' said Tito; 'his visage is a fine and venerable one, though it has worn rather a petrifying look towards me.'

'Ah,' said Nello, 'he is the dragon that guards the remnant of old Bardo's gold, which, I fancy, is chiefly that virgin gold that falls about the fair Romola's head and shoulders; eh, my Apollino?' he added, patting Tito's head.

Tito had the youthful grace of blushing, but he had also the adroit and ready speech that prevents a blush from looking like embarrassment. He replied at once -

'And a very Pactolus it is - a stream with golden ripples. If I were an alchemist -'

He was saved from the need for further speech by the sudden fortissimo of drums and trumpets and fifes, bursting into the breadth of the piazza in a grand storm of sound - a roar, a blast, and a whistling, well befitting a city famous for its musical instruments, and reducing the members of the closest group to a state of deaf isolation.

During this interval Nello observed Tito's fingers moving in recognition of some one in the crowd below, but not seeing the direction of his glance he failed to detect the object of this greeting - the sweet round blue-eyed face under a white hood - immediately lost in the narrow border of heads, where there was a continual eclipse of round contadina cheeks by the harsh-lined features or bent shoulders of an old spadesman, and where profiles turned as sharply from north to south as weathercocks under a shifting wind.

But when it was felt that the show was ended - when the twelve prisoners released in honour of the day, and the very barberi or race-horses, with the arms of their owners embroidered on their cloths, had followed up the Signoria, and been duly consecrated to San Giovanni, and every one was moving from the window - Nello, whose Florentine curiosity was of that lively canine sort which thinks no trifle too despicable for investigation, put his hand on Tito's shoulder and said -

'What acquaintance was that you were making signals to, eh, giovane mio?'

'Some little contadina who probably mistook me for an acquaintance, for she had honoured me with a greeting.'

'Or who wished to begin an acquaintance,' said Nello. 'But you are bound for the Via de' Bardi and the feast of the Muses: there is no counting on you for a frolic, else we might have gone in search of adventures together in the crowd, and had some pleasant fooling in honour of San Giovanni. But your high fortune has come on you too soon: I don't mean the professor's mantle - that is roomy enough to hide a few stolen chickens, but - Messer Endymion minded his manners after that singular good fortune of his and what says our Luigi Pulci?

'Da quel giorno in qua ch'amor m'accese
Per lei son fatto e gentile e cortese."

'Nello, amico mio, thou hast an intolerable trick of making life stale by forestalling it with thy talk,' said Tito, shrugging his shoulders, with a look of patient resignation, which was his nearest approach to anger: 'not to mention that such ill-founded babbling would be held a great offence by that same goddess whose humble worshipper you are always professing yourself.'

'I will be mute,' said Nello, laying his finger on his lips, with a responding shrug. 'But it is only under our four eyes that I talk any folly about her.'

'Pardon! you were on the verge of it just now in the hearing of others. If you want to ruin me in the minds of Bardo and his daughter -'

'Enough, enough!' said Nello. 'I am an absurd old barber. It all comes from that abstinence of mine, in not making bad verses in my youth: for want of letting my folly run out that way when I was eighteen, it runs out at my tongue's end now I am at the unseemly age of fifty. But Nello has not got his head muffled for all that; he can see a buffalo in the snow. Addio, giovane mio.'