

### Chapter 13 - The Shadow of Nemesis

It was the lazy afternoon time on the seventh of September, more than two months after the day on which Romola and Tito had confessed their love to each other.

Tito, just descended into Nello's shop, had found the barber stretched on the bench with his cap over his eyes; one leg was drawn up, and the other had slipped towards the ground, having apparently carried with it a manuscript volume of verse, which lay with its leaves crushed. In a corner sat Sandro, playing a game at mora by himself, and watching the slow reply of his left fingers to the arithmetical demands of his right with solemn-eyed interest.

Treading with the gentlest step, Tito snatched up the lute, and bending over the barber, touched the strings lightly while he sang,-

'Quant' e bella giovinezza  
Che si fugge tuttavia!  
Chi vuol esser lieto sia,  
Di doman non c'e certezza.'

Nello was as easily awaked as a bird. The cap was off his eyes in an instant, and he started up.

'Ah, my Apollino! I am somewhat late with my siesta on this hot day, it seems. That comes of not going to sleep in the natural way, but taking a potion of potent poesy. Hear you, how I am beginning to match my words by the initial letter, like a Trovatore? That is one of my bad symptoms: I am sorely afraid that the good wine of my understanding is going to run off at the spigot of authorship, and I shall be left an empty cask with an odour of dregs, like many another incomparable genius of my acquaintance. What is it, my Orpheus?' here Nello stretched out his arms to their full length, and then brought them round till his hands grasped Tito's curls, and drew them out playfully. 'What is it you want of your well-tamed Nello? For I perceive a coaxing sound in that soft strain of yours. Let me see the very needle's eye of your desire, as the sublime poet says,' that I may thread it.'

'That is but a tailor's image of your sublime poet's,' said Tito, still letting his fingers fall in a light dropping way on the strings. 'But you have divined the reason of my affectionate impatience to see your eyes open. I want you to give me an extra touch of your art - not on my chin, no; but on the zazzera, which is as tangled as your Florentine politics. You have an adroit way of inserting your comb, which flatters the skin, and stirs the animal spirits agreeably in that region; and a little of your most delicate orange-scent would not be amiss, for I am bound to the Scala palace, and am to present myself in radiant

company. The young Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici is to be there, and he brings with him a certain young Bernardo Dovizi of Bibbiena, whose wit is so rapid that I see no way of outrivalling it save by the scent of orange-blossoms.'

Nello had already seized and flourished his comb, and pushed Tito gently backward into the chair, wrapping the cloth round him.

'Never talk of rivalry, *bel giovane mio*: Bernardo Dovizi is a keen youngster, who will never carry a net out to catch the wind; but he has something of the same sharp-muzzled look as his brother Ser Piero, the weasel that Piero de' Medici keeps at his beck to slip through small holes for him. No! you distance all rivals, and may soon touch the sky with your forefinger. They tell me you have even carried enough honey with you to sweeten the sour Messer Angelo; for he has pronounced you less of an ass than might have been expected, considering there is such a good understanding between you and the Secretary.'

'And between ourselves, *Nello mio*, that Messer Angelo has more genius and erudition than I can find in all the other Florentine scholars put together. It may answer very well for them to cry me up now, when Poliziano is beaten down with grief, or illness, or something else; I can try a flight with such a sparrow-hawk as Pietro Crinito, but for Poliziano, he is a large-beaked eagle who would swallow me, feathers and all, and not feel any difference.'

'I will not contradict your modesty there, if you will have it so; but you don't expect us clever Florentines to keep saying the same things over again every day of our lives, as we must do if we always told the truth. We cry down Dante, and we cry up Francesco Cei, just for the sake of variety; and if we cry you up as a new Poliziano, heaven has taken care that it shall not be quite so great a lie as it might have been. And are you not a pattern of virtue in this wicked city? with your ears double-waxed against all siren invitations that would lure you from the *Via de' Bardi*, and the great work which is to astonish posterity?'

'Posterity in good truth, whom it will probably astonish as the universe does, by the impossibility of seeing what was the plan of it.'

'Yes, something like that was being prophesied here the other day. Cristoforo Landino said that the excellent Bardo was one of those scholars who lie overthrown in their learning, like cavaliers in heavy armour, and then get angry because they are over-ridden - which pithy remark, it seems to me, was not a herb out of his own garden, for of all men, for feeding one with an empty spoon and gagging one with vain expectation by long discourse, Messer Cristoforo is the pearl. *Ecco!* you are perfect now.' Here Nello drew away the cloth.

'Impossible to add a grace more! But love is not always to be fed on learning, eh? I shall have to dress the *zazzera* for the betrothal before long - is it not true?'

'Perhaps,' said Tito, smiling, 'unless Messer Bernardo should next recommend Bardo to require that I should yoke a lion and a wild boar to the car of the *Zecca* before I can win my *Alcestis*. But I confess he is right in holding me unworthy of *Romola*, she is a *Pleiad* that may grow dim by marrying any mortal.'

'Gnaffe, your modesty is in the right place there. Yet fate seems to have measured and chiselled you for the niche that was left empty by the old man's son, who, by the way *Cronaca* was telling me, is now at *San Marco*. Did you know?'

A slight electric shock passed through Tito as he rose from the chair, but it was not outwardly perceptible, for he immediately stooped to pick up the fallen book, and busied his fingers with flattening the leaves, while he said -

'No; he was at *Fiesole*, I thought. Are you sure he is come back to *San Marco*?'

'*Cronaca* is my authority,' said *Nello*, with a shrug. 'I don't frequent that sanctuary, but he does. Ah,' he added, taking the book from *Tito's* hands, 'my poor *Nencia da Barberino*! It jars your scholarly feelings to see the pages dog's-eared. I was lulled to sleep by the well-rhymed charms of that rustic maiden - 'prettier than the turnip-flower,' 'with a cheek more savoury than cheese.' But to get such a well-scented notion of the *contadina*, one must lie on velvet cushions in the *Via Larga* - not go to look at the *Fierucoloni* stumping in to the *Piazza della Nunziata* this evening after sundown.'

'And pray who are the *Fierucoloni*?' said *Tito*, indifferently, settling his cap.

'The *contadine* who came from the mountains of *Pistoia*, and the *Casentino*, and heaven knows where, to keep their vigil in the church of the *Nunziata*, and sell their yarn and dried mushrooms at the *Fierucola*, as we call it. They make a queer show, with their paper lanterns, howling their hymns to the *Virgin* on this eve of her nativity - if you had the leisure to see them. No? - well, I have had enough of it myself, for there is wild work in the *Piazza*. One may happen to get a stone or two about one's ears or shins without asking for it, and I was never fond of that pressing attention. Addio.'

*Tito* carried a little uneasiness with him on his visit, which ended earlier than he had expected, the boy-cardinal *Giovanni de' Medici*,

youngest of red-hatted fathers, who has since presented his broad dark cheek very conspicuously to posterity as Pope Leo the Tenth, having been detained at his favourite pastime of the chase, and having failed to appear. It still wanted half an hour of sunset as he left the door of the Scala palace, with the intention of proceeding forthwith to the Via de' Bardi; but he had not gone far when, to his astonishment, he saw Romola advancing towards him along the Borgo Pinti.

She wore a thick black veil and black mantle, but it was impossible to mistake her figure and her walk; and by her side was a short stout form, which he recognised as that of Monna Brigida, in spite of the unusual plainness of her attire. Romola had not been bred up to devotional observances, and the occasions on which she took the air elsewhere than under the loggia on the roof of the house, were so rare and so much dwelt on beforehand, because of Bardo's dislike to be left without her, that Tito felt sure there must have been some sudden and urgent ground for an absence of which he had heard nothing the day before. She saw him through her veil and hastened her steps.

'Romola, has anything happened?' said Tito, turning to walk by her side.

She did not answer at the first moment, and Monna Brigida broke in.

'Ah, Messer Tito, you do well to turn round, for we are in haste. And is it not a misfortune? - we are obliged to go round by the walls and turn up the Via del Maglio, because of the Fair; for the contadine coming in block up the way by the Nunziata, which would have taken us to San Marco in half the time.'

Tito's heart gave a great bound, and began to beat violently.

'Romola,' he said, in a lower tone, 'are you going to San Marco?'

They were now out of the Borgo Pinti and were under the city walls, where they had wide gardens on their left hand, and all was quiet. Romola put aside her veil for the sake of breathing the air, and he could see the subdued agitation in her face.

'Yes, Tito mio,' she said, looking directly at him with sad eyes. 'For the first time I am doing something unknown to my father. It comforts me that I have met you, for at least I can tell you. But if you are going to him, it will be well for you not to say that you met me. He thinks I am only gone to my cousin, because she sent for me. I left my godfather with him: he knows where I am going, and why. You remember that evening when my brother's name was mentioned and my father spoke of him to you?'

'Yes,' said Tito, in a low tone. There was a strange complication in his mental state. His heart sank at the probability that a great change was coming over his prospects, while at the same time his thoughts were darting over a hundred details of the course he would take when the change had come; and yet he returned Romola's gaze with a hungry sense that it might be the last time she would ever bend it on him with full unquestioning confidence.

'The cugina had heard that he was come back, and the evening before - the evening of San Giovanni - as I afterwards found, he had been seen by our good Maso near the door of our house; but when Maso went to inquire at San Marco, Dino, that is, my brother - he was christened Bernardino, after our godfather, but now he calls himself Fra Luca - had been taken to the monastery at Fiesole, because he was ill. But this morning a message came to Maso, saying that he was come back to San Marco, and Maso went to him there. He is very ill, and he has adjured me to go and see him. I cannot refuse it, though I hold him guilty; I still remember how I loved him when I was a little girl before I knew that he would forsake my father. And perhaps he has some word of penitence to send by me. It cost me a struggle to act in opposition to my father's feeling, which I have always held to be just. I am almost sure you will think I have chosen rightly, Tito, because I have noticed that your nature is less rigid than mine, and nothing makes you angry: it would cost you less to be forgiving; though, if you had seen your father forsaken by one to whom he had given his chief love - by one in whom he had planted his labour and his hopes - forsaken when his need was becoming greatest - even you, Tito, would find it hard to forgive.'

What could he say? He was not equal to the hypocrisy of telling Romola that such offences ought not to be pardoned; and he had not the courage to utter any words of dissuasion.

'You are right, my Romola; you are always right, except in thinking too well of me.'

There was really some genuineness in those last words, and Tito looked very beautiful as he uttered them, with an unusual pallor in his face, and a slight quivering of his lip. Romola, interpreting all things largely, like a mind prepossessed with high beliefs, had a tearful brightness in her eyes as she looked at him, touched with keen joy that he felt so strongly whatever she felt. But without pausing in her walk, she said -

'And now, Tito, I wish you to leave me, for the cugina and I shall be less noticed if we enter the piazza alone.'

'Yes, it were better you should leave us,' said Monna Brigida; 'for to say the truth, Messer Tito, all eyes follow you, and let Romola muffle herself as she will, every one wants to see what there is under her veil, for she has that way of walking like a procession. Not that I find fault with her for it, only it doesn't suit my steps. And, indeed, I would rather not have us seen going to San Marco, and that's why I am dressed as if I were one of the Piagnoni themselves, and as old as Sant' Anna; for if it had been anybody but poor Dino, who ought to be forgiven if he's dying, for what's the use of having a grudge against dead people? - make them feel while they live, say I -'

No one made a scruple of interrupting Monna Brigida, and Tito, having just raised Romola's hand to his lips, and said, 'I understand, I obey you,' now turned away, lifting his cap - a sign of reverence rarely made at that time by native Florentines, and which excited Bernardo del Nero's contempt for 'Tito as a fawning Greek, while to Romola, who loved homage, it gave him an exceptional grace.

He was half glad of the dismissal, half disposed to cling to Romola to the last moment in which she would love him without suspicion. For it seemed to him certain that this brother would before all things want to know, and that Romola would before all things confide to him, what was her father's position and her own after the years which must have brought so much change. She would tell him that she was soon to be publicly betrothed to a young scholar, who was to fill up the place left vacant long ago by a wandering son. He foresaw the impulse that would prompt Romola to dwell on that prospect, and what would follow on the mention of the future husband's name. Fra Luca would tell all he knew and conjectured, and Tito saw no possible falsity by which he could now ward off the worst consequences of his former dissimulation. It was all over with his prospects in Florence. There was Messer Bernardo del Nero, who would be delighted at seeing confirmed the wisdom of his advice about deferring the betrothal until Tito's character and position had been established by a longer residence; and the history of the young Greek professor, whose benefactor was in slavery, would be the talk under every loggia. For the first time in his life he felt too fevered and agitated to trust his power of self-command; he gave up his intended visit to Bardo, and walked up and down under the walls until the yellow light in the west had quite faded, when, without any distinct purpose, he took the first turning, which happened to be the Via San Sebastiano, leading him directly towards the Piazza dell' Annunziata.

He was at one of those lawless moments which come to us all if we have no guide but desire, and if the pathway where desire leads us seems suddenly closed, he was ready to follow any beckoning that offered him an immediate purpose.