

## Chapter 16 - A Florentine Joke

Early the next morning Tito was returning from Bratti's shop in the narrow thoroughfare of the Ferravecchi. The Genoese stranger had carried away the onyx ring, and Tito was carrying away fifty florins. It did just cross his mind that if, after all, Fortune, by one of her able devices, saved him from the necessity of quitting Florence, it would be better for him not to have parted with his ring, since he had been understood to wear it for the sake of peculiar memories and predilections; still, it was a slight matter, not worth dwelling on with any emphasis, and in those moments he had lost his confidence in fortune. The feverish excitement of the first alarm which had impelled his mind to travel into the future had given place to a dull, regretful lassitude. He cared so much for the pleasures that could only come to him through the good opinion of his fellow-men, that he wished now he had never risked ignominy by shrinking from what his fellow-men called obligations.

But our deeds are like children that are born to us; they live and act apart from our own will. Nay, children may be strangled, but deeds never: they have an indestructible life both in and out of our consciousness; and that dreadful vitality of deeds was pressing hard on Tito for the first time.

He was going back to his lodgings in the Piazza di San Giovanni, but he avoided passing through the Mercato Vecchio, which was his nearest way, lest he should see Tessa. He was not in the humour to seek anything; he could only await the first sign of his altering lot.

The piazza with its sights of beauty was lit up by that warm morning sunlight under which the autumn dew still lingers, and which invites to an idlesse undulled by fatigue. It was a festival morning, too, when the soft warmth seems to steal over one with a special invitation to lounge and gaze. Here, too, the signs of the fair were present; in the spaces round the octagonal baptistery, stalls were being spread with fruit and flowers, and here and there laden mules were standing quietly absorbed in their nose-bags, while their drivers were perhaps gone through the hospitable sacred doors to kneel before the blessed Virgin on this morning of her Nativity. On the broad marble steps of the Duomo there were scattered groups of beggars and gossiping talkers: here an old crone with white hair and hard sunburnt face encouraging a round-capped baby to try its tiny bare feet on the warmed marble, while a dog sitting near snuffed at the performance suspiciously; there a couple of shaggy-headed boys leaning to watch a small pale cripple who was cutting a face on a cherry-stone; and above them on the wide platform men were making changing knots in laughing desultory chat, or else were standing in close couples gesticulating eagerly.

But the largest and most important company of loungers was that towards which Tito had to direct his steps. It was the busiest time of the day with Nello, and in this warm season and at an hour when clients were numerous, most men preferred being shaved under the pretty red and white awning in front of the shop rather than within narrow walls. It is not a sublime attitude for a man, to sit with lathered chin thrown backward, and have his nose made a handle of; but to be shaved was a fashion of Florentine respectability, and it is astonishing how gravely men look at each other when they are all in the fashion. It was the hour of the day, too, when yesterday's crop of gossip was freshest, and the barber's tongue was always in its glory when his razor was busy; the deft activity of those two instruments seemed to be set going by a common spring. Tito foresaw that it would be impossible for him to escape being drawn into the circle; he must smile and retort, and look perfectly at his ease. Well! it was but the ordeal of swallowing bread and cheese pills after all. The man who let the mere anticipation of discovery choke him was simply a man of weak nerves.

But just at that time Tito felt a hand laid on his shoulder, and no amount of previous resolution could prevent the very unpleasant sensation with which that sudden touch jarred him. His face, as he turned it round, betrayed the inward shock; but the owner of the hand that seemed to have such evil magic in it broke into a light laugh. He was a young man about Tito's own age, with keen features, small close-clipped head, and close-shaven lip and chin, giving the idea of a mind as little encumbered as possible with material that was not nervous. The keen eyes were bright with hope and friendliness, as so many other young eyes have been that have afterwards closed on the world in bitterness and disappointment; for at that time there were none but pleasant predictions about Niccolo Macchiavelli, as a young man of promise, who was expected to mend the broken fortunes of his ancient family.

'Why, Melema, what evil dream did you have last night, that you took my light grasp for that of a sbirro or something worse?'

'Ah, Messer Niccolo!' said Tito, recovering himself immediately; 'it must have been an extra amount of dulness in my veins this morning that shuddered at the approach of your wit. But the fact is, I have had a bad night.'

'That is unlucky, because you will be expected to shine without any obstructing fog to-day in the Rucellai Gardens. I take it for granted you are to be there.'

'Messer Bernardo did me the honour to invite me,' said Tito; 'but I shall be engaged elsewhere.'

'Ah! I remember, you are in love,' said Macchiavelli, with a shrug, 'else you would never have such inconvenient engagements. Why, we are to eat a peacock and ortolans under the loggia among Bernardo Rucellai's rare trees; there are to be the choicest spirits in Florence and the choicest wines. Only, as Piero de' Medici is to be there, the choice spirits may happen to be swamped in the capping of impromptu verses. I hate that game; it is a device for the triumph of small wits, who are always inspired the most by the smallest occasions.'

'What is that you are saying about Piero de' Medici and small wits, Messer Niccolo?' said Nello, whose light figure was at that moment predominating over the Herculean frame of Niccolo Caparra.

That famous worker in iron, whom we saw last with bared muscular arms and leathern apron in the Mercato Vecchio, was this morning dressed in holiday suit, and as he sat submissively while Nello skipped round him, lathered him, seized him by the nose, and scraped him with magical quickness, he looked much as a lion might if it had donned linen and tunic and was preparing to go into society.

'A private secretary will never rise in the world if he couples great and small in that way,' continued Nello. 'When great men are not allowed to marry their sons and daughters as they like, small men must not expect to marry their words as they like. Have you heard the news Domenico Cennini, here, has been telling us? - that Pagolantonio Soderini has given Ser Picro da Bibbiena a box on the ear for setting on Piero de' Medici to interfere with the marriage between young Tommaso Soderini and Fiammetta Strozzi, and is to be sent ambassador to Venice as a punishment?'

'I don't know which I envy him most,' said Macchiavelli, 'the offence or the punishment. The offence will make him the most popular man in all Florence, and the punishment will take him among the only people in Italy who have known how to manage their own affairs.'

'Yes, if Soderini stays long enough at Venice,' said Cennini, 'he may chance to learn the Venetian fashion, and bring it home with him. The Soderini have been fast friends of the Medici, but what has happened is likely to open Pagolantonio's eyes to the good of our old Florentine trick of choosing a new harness when the old one galls us; if we have not quite lost the trick in these last fifty years.'

'Not we,' said Niccolo Caparra, who was rejoicing in the free use of his lips again. 'Eat eggs in Lent and the snow will melt. That's what I say to our people when they get noisy over their cups at San Gallo, and talk of raising a romor (insurrection): I say, never do you plan a romor;

you may as well try to fill Arno with buckets. When there's water enough Arno will be full, and that will not be till the torrent is ready.'

'Caparra, that oracular speech of yours is due to my excellent shaving,' said Nello. 'You could never have made it with that dark rust on your chin. Ecco, Messer Domenico, I am ready for you now. By the way, my bel erudito,' continued Nello, as he saw Tito moving towards the door, 'here has been old Maso seeking for you, but your nest was empty. He will come again presently. The old man looked mournful, and seemed in haste. I hope there is nothing wrong in the Via de' Bardi.'

'Doubtless Messer Tito knows that Bardo's son is dead,' said Cronaca, who had just come up.

Tito's heart gave a leap - had the death happened before Romola saw him?

'No, I had not heard it,' he said, with no more discomposure than the occasion seemed to warrant, turning and leaning against the doorpost, as if he had given up his intention of going away. 'I knew that his sister had gone to see him. Did he die before she arrived?'

'No,' said Cronaca; 'I was in San Marco at the time, and saw her come out from the chapter-house with Fra Girolamo, who told us that the dying man's breath had been preserved as by a miracle, that he might make a disclosure to his sister.'

Tito felt that his fate was decided. Again his mind rushed over all the circumstances of his departure from Florence, and he conceived a plan of getting back his money from Cennini before the disclosure had become public. If he once had his money he need not stay long in endurance of scorching looks and biting words. He would wait now, and go away with Cennini and get the money from him at once. With that project in his mind he stood motionless - his hands in his belt, his eyes fixed absently on the ground. Nello, glancing at him, felt sure that he was absorbed in anxiety about Romola, and thought him such a pretty image of self-forgetful sadness, that he just perceptibly pointed his razor at him, and gave a challenging look at Piero di Cosimo, whom he had never forgiven for his refusal to see any prognostics of character in his favourite's handsome face. Piero, who was leaning against the other doorpost, close to Tito, shrugged his shoulders: the frequent recurrence of such challenges from Nello had changed the painter's first declaration of neutrality into a positive inclination to believe ill of the much-praised Greek.

'So you have got your Fra Girolamo back again, Cronaca? I suppose we shall have him preaching again this next Advent,' said Nello.

'And not before there is need,' said Cronaca, gravely. 'We have had the best testimony to his words since the last Quaresima; for even to the wicked wickedness has become a plague; and the ripeness of vice is turning to rottenness in the nostrils even of the vicious. There has not been a change since the Quaresima, either in Rome or at Florence, but has put a new seal on the Frate's words - that the harvest of sin is ripe, and that God will reap it with a sword.'

'I hope he has had a new vision, however,' said Francesco Cei, sneeringly. 'The old ones are somewhat stale. Can't your Frate get a poet to help out his imagination for him?'

'He has no lack of poets about him,' said Cronaca, with quiet contempt, 'but they are great poets and not little ones; so they are contented to be taught by him, and no more think the truth stale which God has given him to utter, than they think the light of the moon is stale. But perhaps certain high prelates and princes who dislike the Frate's denunciations might be pleased to hear that, though Giovanni Pico, and Poliziano, and Marsilio Ficino, and most other men of mark in Florence, reverence Fra Girolamo, Messer Francesco Cei despises him.'

'Poliziano?' said Cei, with a scornful laugh. 'Yes, doubtless he believes in your new Jonah; witness the fine orations he wrote for the envoys of Sienna, to tell Alexander the Sixth that the world and the Church were never so well off as since he became Pope.'

'Nay, Francesco,' said Macchiavelli, smiling, 'a various scholar must have various opinions. And as for the Frate, whatever we may think of his saintliness, you judge his preaching too narrowly. The secret of oratory lies, not in saying new things, but in saying things with a certain power that moves the hearers - without which, as old Filelfo has said, your speaker deserves to be called, 'non oratorem, sed aratorem.' And, according to that test, Fra Girolamo is a great orator.'

'That is true, Niccolo,' said Cennini, speaking from the shaving-chair, 'but part of the secret lies in the prophetic visions. Our people - no offence to you, Cronaca - will run after anything in the shape of a prophet, especially if he prophesies terrors and tribulations.'

'Rather say, Cennini,' answered Cronaca, 'that the chief secret lies in the Frate's pure life and strong faith, which stamp him as a messenger of God.'

'I admit it - I admit it,' said Cennini, opening his palms, as he rose from the chair. 'His life is spotless: no man has impeached it.'

'He is satisfied with the pleasant lust of arrogance,' Cei burst out, bitterly. 'I can see it in that proud lip and satisfied eye of his. He hears the air filled with his own name - Fra Girolamo Savonarola, of Ferrara; the prophet, the saint, the mighty preacher, who frightens the very babies of Florence into laying down their wicked baubles.'

'Come, come, Francesco, you are out of humour with waiting,' said the conciliatory Nello. 'Let me stop your mouth with a little lather. I must not have my friend Cronaca made angry: I have a regard for his chin; and his chin is in no respect altered since he became a Piagnone. And for my own part, I confess, when the Frate was preaching in the Duomo last Advent, I got into such a trick of slipping in to listen to him that I might have turned Piagnone too, if I had not been hindered by the liberal nature of my art; and also by the length of the sermons, which are sometimes a good while before they get to the moving point. But, as Messer Niccolo here says, the Frate lays hold of the people by some power over and above his prophetic visions. Monks and nuns who prophesy are not of that rareness. For what says Luigi Pulci? 'Dombruno's sharp-cutting scimitar had the fame of being enchanted; but,' says Luigi, 'I am rather of opinion that it cut sharp because it was of strongly-tempered steel.' Yes, yes; Paternosters may shave clean, but they must be said over a good razor.'

'See, Nello!' said Macchiavelli, 'what doctor is this advancing on his Bucephalus? I thought your piazza was free from those furred and scarlet-robed lackeys of death. This man looks as if he had had some such night adventure as Boccaccio's Maestro Simone and had his bonnet and mantle pickled a little in the gutter; though he himself is as sleek as a miller's rat.'

'A-ah!' said Nello, with a low long-drawn intonation, as he looked up towards the advancing figure - a round-headed, round-bodied personage, seated on a raw young horse, which held its nose out with an air of threatening obstinacy, and by a constant effort to back and go off in an oblique line showed free views about authority very much in advance of the age.

'And I have a few more adventures in pickle for him,' continued Nello, in an undertone, 'which I hope will drive his inquiring nostrils to another quarter of the city. He's a doctor from Padua; they say he has been at Prato for three months, and now he's come to Florence to see what he can net. But his great trick is making rounds among the contadini. And do you note those great saddle-bags he carries? They are to hold the fat capons and eggs and meal he levies on silly clowns with whom coin is scarce. He vends his own secret medicines, so he keeps away from the doors of the druggists; and for this last week he has taken to sitting in my piazza for two or three hours every day, and making it a resort for asthmas and squalling bambini. It stirs my gall

to see the toad-faced quack fingering the greasy quattrini, or bagging a pigeon in exchange for his pills and powders. But I'll put a few thorns in his saddle, else I'm no Florentine. Laudamus! he is coming to be shaved: that's what I've waited for. Messer Domenico, go not away: wait; you shall see a rare bit of fooling, which I devised two days ago. Here, Sandro!

Nello whispered in the ear of Sandro, who rolled his solemn eyes, nodded, and, following up these signs of understanding with a slow smile, took to his heels with surprising rapidity.

'How is it with you, Maestro Tacco?' said Nello, as the doctor, with difficulty, brought his horse's head round towards the barber's shop. 'That is a fine young horse of yours, but something raw in the mouth, eh?'

'He is an accursed beast, the verrocane seize him!' said Maestro Tacco, with a burst of irritation, descending from his saddle and fastening the old bridle, mended with string, to an iron staple in the wall. 'Nevertheless,' he added, recollecting himself, 'a sound beast and a valuable, for one who wanted to purchase, and get a profit by training him. I had him cheap.'

'Rather too hard riding for a man who carries your weight of learning: eh, Maestro?' said Nello. 'You seem hot.'

'Truly, I am likely to be hot,' said the doctor, taking off his bonnet, and giving to full view a bald low head and flat broad face, with high ears, wide lipless mouth, round eyes, and deep arched lines above the projecting eyebrows, which altogether made Nello's epithet 'toad-faced' dubiously complimentary to the blameless batrachian. 'Riding from Peretola, when the sun is high, is not the same thing as kicking your heels on a bench in the shade, like your Florence doctors. Moreover, I have had not a little pulling to get through the carts and mules into the Mercato, to find out the husband of a certain Monna Ghita, who had had a fatal seizure before I was called in; and if it had not been that I had to demand my fees -'

'Monna Ghita!' said Nello, as the perspiring doctor interrupted himself to rub his head and face. 'Peace be with her angry soul! The Mercato will want a whip the more if her tongue is laid to rest.'

Tito, who had roused himself from his abstraction, and was listening to the dialogue, felt a new rush of the vague half-formed ideas about Tessa, which had passed through his mind the evening before: if Monna Ghita were really taken out of the way, it would be easier for him to see Tessa again - whenever he wanted to see her.

'Gnaffe, Maestro,' Nello went on, in a sympathising tone, 'you are the slave of rude mortals, who, but for you, would die like brutes, without help of pill or powder. It is pitiful to see your learned lymph oozing from your pores as if it were mere vulgar moisture. You think my shaving will cool and disencumber you? One moment and I have done with Messer Francesco here. It seems to me a thousand years till I wait upon a man who carries all the science of Arabia in his head and saddle-bags. Ecco!'

Nello held up the shaving-cloth with an air of invitation, and Maestro Tacco advanced and seated himself under a preoccupation with his heat and his self-importance, which made him quite deaf to the irony conveyed in Nello's officiously polite speech.

'It is but fitting that a great medicus like you,' said Nello, adjusting the cloth, 'should be shaved by the same razor that has shaved the illustrious Antonio Benevieni, the greatest master of the chirurgic art.'

'The chirurgic art!' interrupted the doctor, with an air of contemptuous disgust. 'Is it your Florentine fashion to put the masters of the science of medicine on a level with men who do carpentry on broken limbs, and sew up wounds like tailors, and carve away excrescences as a butcher trims meat? Via! A manual art, such as any artificer might learn, and which has been practised by simple barbers like yourself - on a level with the noble science of Hippocrates, Galen, and Avicenna, which penetrates into the occult influences of the stars and plants and gems! - a science locked up from the vulgar!'

'No, in truth, Maestro,' said Nello, using his lather very deliberately, as if he wanted to prolong the operation to the utmost, 'I never thought of placing them on a level: I know your science comes next to the miracles of Holy Church for mystery. But there, you see, is the pity of it' - here Nello fell into a tone of regretful sympathy - 'your high science is sealed from the profane and the vulgar, and so you become an object of envy and slander. I grieve to say it, but there are low fellows in this city - mere sgherri, who go about in nightcaps and long beards, and make it their business to sprinkle gall in every man's broth who is prospering. Let me tell you - for you are a stranger - this is a city where every man had need carry a large nail ready to fasten on the wheel of Fortune when his side happens to be uppermost. Already there are stories - mere fables doubtless - beginning to be buzzed about concerning you, that make me wish I could hear of your being well on your way to Arezzo. I would not have a man of your metal stoned, for though San Stefano was stoned, he was not great in medicine like San Cosmo and San Damiano ...'

'What stories? what fables?' stammered Maestro Tacco. 'What do you mean?'

'Lasso! I fear me you are come into the trap for your cheese, Maestro. The fact is, there is a company of evil youths who go prowling about the houses of our citizens carrying sharp tools in their pockets; - no sort of door, or window, or shutter, but they will pierce it. They are possessed with a diabolical patience to watch the doings of people who fancy themselves private. It must be they who have done it - it must be they who have spread the stories about you and your medicines. Have you by chance detected any small aperture in your door, or window-shutter? No? Well, I advise you to look; for it is now commonly talked of that you have been seen in your dwelling at the Canto di Paglia, making your secret specifics by night: pounding dried toads in a mortar, compounding a salve out of mashed worms, and making your pills from the dried livers of rats which you mix with saliva emitted during the utterance of a blasphemous incantation - which indeed these witnesses profess to repeat.'

'It is a pack of lies!' exclaimed the doctor, struggling to get utterance, and then desisting in alarm at the approaching razor.

'It is not to me, or any of this respectable company, that you need to say that, doctor. We are not the heads to plant such carrots as those in. But what of that? What are a handful of reasonable men against a crowd with stones in their hands? There are those among us who think Cecco d'Ascoli was an innocent sage - and we all know how he was burnt alive for being wiser than his fellows. Ah, doctor, it is not by living at Padua that you can learn to know Florentines. My belief is, they would stone the Holy Father himself, if they could find a good excuse for it; and they are persuaded that you are a necromancer, who is trying to raise the pestilence by selling secret medicines - and I am told your specifics have in truth an evil smell.'

'It is false!' burst out the doctor, as Nello moved away his razor; 'it is false! I will show the pills and the powders to these honourable signori - and the salve - it has an excellent odour - an odour of - of salve.' He started up with the lather on his chin, and the cloth round his neck, to search in his saddle-bag for the belied medicines, and Nello in an instant adroitly shifted the shaving-chair till it was in the close vicinity of the horse's head, while Sandro, who had now returned, at a sign from his master placed himself near the bridle.

'Behold, Messeri!' said the doctor, bringing a small box of medicines and opening it before them. 'Let any signor apply this box to his nostrils and he will find an honest odour of medicaments - not indeed of pounded gems, or rare vegetables from the East, or stones found in the bodies of birds; for I practise on the diseases of the vulgar, for whom heaven has provided cheaper and less powerful remedies according to their degree: and there are even remedies known to our science which are entirely free of cost - as the new tussis may be

counteracted in the poor, who can pay for no specifics, by a resolute holding of the breath. And here is a paste which is even of savoury odour, and is infallible against melancholia, being concocted under the conjunction of Jupiter and Venus; and I have seen it allay spasms.'

'Stay, Maestro,' said Nello, while the doctor had his lathered face turned towards the group near the door, eagerly holding out his box, and lifting out one specific after another; 'here comes a crying contadina with her baby. Doubtless she is in search of you; it is perhaps an opportunity for you to show this honourable company a proof of your skill. Here, buona donna! here is the famous doctor. Why, what is the matter with the sweet bimbo?'

This question was addressed to a sturdy-looking, broad-shouldered contadina, with her head-drapery folded about her face so that little was to be seen but a bronzed nose and a pair of dark eyes and eyebrows. She carried her child packed up in a stiff mummy-shaped case in which Italian babies have been from time immemorial introduced into society, turning its face a little towards her bosom, and making those sorrowful grimaces which women are in the habit of using as a sort of pulleys to draw down reluctant tears.

'Oh, for the love of the Holy Madonna!' said the woman, in a wailing voice; 'will you look at my poor bimbo? I know I can't pay you for it, but I took it into the Nunziata last night, and it's turned a worse colour than before; it's the convulsions. But when I was holding it before the Santissima Nunziata, I remembered they said there was a new doctor come who cured everything; and so I thought it might be the will of the Holy Madonna that I should bring it to you.'

'Sit down, Maestro, sit down,' said Nello. 'Here is an opportunity for you; here are honourable witnesses who will declare before the Magnificent Eight that they have seen you practising honestly and relieving a poor woman's child. And then if your life is in danger, the Magnificent Eight will put you in prison a little while just to insure your safety, and after that, their sbirri will conduct you out of Florence by night, as they did the zealous Frate Minore who preached against the Jews. What! our people are given to stone-throwing; but we have magistrates.'

The doctor, unable to refuse, seated himself in the shaving-chair, trembling, half with fear and half with rage, and by this time quite unconscious of the lather which Nello had laid on with such profuseness. He deposited his medicine-case on his knees, took out his precious spectacles (wondrous Florentine device!) from his wallet, lodged them carefully above his flat nose and high ears, and lifting up his brows, turned towards the applicant.

'O Santiddio! look at him,' said the woman, with a more piteous wail than ever, as she held out the small mummy, which had its head completely concealed by dingy drapery wound round the head of the portable cradle, but seemed to be struggling and crying in a demoniacal fashion under this imprisonment. 'The fit is on him! Ohime! I know what colour he is; it's the evil eye - oh!'

The doctor, anxiously holding his knees together to support his box, bent his spectacles towards the baby, and said cautiously, 'It may be a new disease; unwind these rags, Monna!'

The contadina, with sudden energy, snatched off the encircling linen, when out struggled - scratching, grinning, and screaming - what the doctor in his fright fully believed to be a demon, but what Tito recognised as Vaiano's monkey, made more formidable by an artificial blackness, such as might have come from a hasty rubbing up the chimney.

Up started the unfortunate doctor, letting his medicine-box fall, and away jumped the no less terrified and indignant monkey, finding the first resting-place for his claws on the horse's mane, which he used as a sort of rope-ladder till he had fairly found his equilibrium, when he continued to clutch it as a bridle. The horse wanted no spur under such a rider, and, the already loosened bridle offering no resistance, darted off across the piazza, with the monkey, clutching, grinning, and blinking, on his neck.

'Il cavallo! Il Diavolo!' was now shouted on all sides by the idle rascals who gathered from all quarters of the piazza, and was echoed in tones of alarm by the stall-keepers, whose vested interests seemed in some danger; while the doctor, out of his wits with confused terror at the Devil, the possible stoning, and the escape of his horse, took to his heels with spectacles on nose, lathered face, and the shaving-cloth about his neck, crying - 'Stop him! stop him! for a powder - a florin - stop him for a florin!' while the lads, outstripping him, clapped their hands and shouted encouragement to the runaway.

The cerretano, who had not bargained for the flight of his monkey along with the horse, had caught up his petticoats with much celerity, and showed a pair of parti-coloured hose above his contadina's shoes, far in advance of the doctor. And away went the grotesque race up the Corso degli Adimari - the horse with the singular jockey, the contadina with the remarkable hose, and the doctor in lather and spectacles, with furred mantle outflying.

It was a scene such as Florentines loved, from the potent and reverend signor going to council in his lucco, down to the grinning youngster, who felt himself master of all situations when his bag was

filled with smooth stones from the convenient dry bed of the torrent. The grey-headed Domenico Cennini laughed no less heartily than the younger men, and Nello was triumphantly secure of the general admiration.

'Aha!' he exclaimed, snapping his fingers when the first burst of laughter was subsiding. 'I have cleared my piazza of that unsavoury fly-trap, mi pare. Maestro Tacco will no more come here again to sit for patients than he will take to licking marble for his dinner.'

'You are going towards the Piazza della Signoria, Messer Domenico,' said Macchiavelli. 'I will go with you, and we shall perhaps see who has deserved the palio among these racers. Come, Melema, will you go too?'

It had been precisely Tito's intention to accompany Cennini, but before he had gone many steps, he was called back by Nello, who saw Maso approaching.

Maso's message was from Romola. She wished Tito to go to the Via de' Bardi as soon as possible. She would see him under the loggia, at the top of the house, as she wished to speak to him alone.