

Chapter 18 - The Portrait

When Tito left the Via de' Bardi that day in exultant satisfaction at finding himself thoroughly free from the threatened peril, his thoughts, no longer claimed by the immediate presence of Romola and her father, recurred to those futile hours of dread in which he was conscious of having not only felt but acted as he would not have done if he had had a truer foresight. He would not have parted with his ring; for Romola, and others to whom it was a familiar object, would be a little struck with the apparent sordidness of parting with a gem he had professedly cherished, unless he feigned as a reason the desire to make some special gift with the purchase-money; and Tito had at that moment a nauseating weariness of simulation. He was well out of the possible consequences that might have fallen on him from that initial deception, and it was no longer a load on his mind; kind fortune had brought him immunity, and he thought it was only fair that she should. Who was hurt by it? The results to Baldassarre were too problematical to be taken into account. But he wanted now to be free from any hidden shackles that would gall him, though ever so little, under his ties to Romola. He was not aware that that very delight in immunity which prompted resolutions not to entangle himself again, was deadening the sensibilities which alone could save him from entanglement.

But, after all, the sale of the ring was a slight matter. Was it also a slight matter that little Tessa was under a delusion which would doubtless fill her small head with expectations doomed to disappointment? Should he try to see the little thing alone again and undeceive her at once, or should he leave the disclosure to time and chance? Happy dreams are pleasant, and they easily come to an end with daylight and the stir of life. The sweet, pouting, innocent, round thing! It was impossible not to think of her. Tito thought he should like some time to take her a present that would please her, and just learn if her step-father treated her more cruelly now her mother was dead. Or, should he at once undeceive Tessa, and then tell Romola about her, so that they might find some happier lot for the poor thing? No: that unfortunate little incident of the cerretano and the marriage, and his allowing Tessa to part from him in delusion, must never be known to Romola, and since no enlightenment could expel it from Tessa's mind, there would always be a risk of betrayal; besides even little Tessa might have some gall in her when she found herself disappointed in her love - yes, she must be a little in love with him, and that might make it well that he should not see her again. Yet it was a trifling adventure such as a country girl would perhaps ponder on till some ruddy contadino made acceptable love to her, when she would break her resolution of secrecy and get at the truth that she was free. Dunque - good-bye, Tessa! kindest wishes! Tito had made up his mind that the silly little affair of the cerretano should have no

further consequences for himself; and people are apt to think that resolutions taken on their own behalf will be firm. As for the fifty-five florins, the purchase-money of the ring, Tito had made up his mind what to do with some of them; he would carry out a pretty ingenious thought which would set him more at ease in accounting for the absence of his ring to Romola, and would also serve him as a means of guarding her mind from the recurrence of those monkish fancies which were especially repugnant to him; and with this thought in his mind, he went to the Via Gualfonda to find Piero di Cosimo, the artist who at that time was preeminent in the fantastic mythological design which Tito's purpose required.

Entering the court on which Piero's dwelling opened, Tito found the heavy iron knocker on the door thickly bound round with wool and ingeniously fastened with cords. Remembering the painter's practice of stuffing his ears against obtrusive noises, Tito was not much surprised at this mode of defence against visitors' thunder, and betook himself first to tapping modestly with his knuckles, and then to a more importunate attempt to shake the door. In vain! Tito was moving away, blaming himself for wasting his time on this visit, instead of waiting till he saw the painter again at Nello's, when a little girl entered the court with a basket of eggs on her arm, went up to the door, and standing on tiptoe, pushed up a small iron plate that ran in grooves, and putting her mouth to the aperture thus disclosed, called out in a piping voice, 'Messer Piero!'

In a few moments Tito heard the sound of bolts, the door opened, and Piero presented himself in a red right-cap and a loose brown serge tunic, with sleeves rolled up to the shoulder. He darted a look of surprise at Tito, but without further notice of him stretched out his hand to take the basket from the child, re-entered the house, and presently returning with the empty basket, said, 'How much to pay?'

'Two grossoni, Messer Piero; they are all ready boiled, my mother says.'

Piero took the coin out of the leathern scarsella at his belt, and the little maiden trotted away, not without a few upward glances of awed admiration at the surprising young signor.

Piero's glance was much less complimentary as he said -

'What do you want at my door, Messer Greco? I saw you this morning at Nello's; if you had asked me then, I could have told you that I see no man in this house without knowing his business and agreeing with him beforehand.'

'Pardon, Messer Piero,' said Tito, with his imperturbable good-humour; 'I acted without sufficient reflection. I remembered nothing but your admirable skill in inventing pretty caprices, when a sudden desire for something of that sort prompted me to come to you.'

The painter's manners were too notoriously odd to all the world for this reception to be held a special affront; but even if Tito had suspected any offensive intention, the impulse to resentment would have been less strong in him than the desire to conquer goodwill.

Piero made a grimace which was habitual with him when he was spoken to with flattering suavity. He grinned, stretched out the corners of his mouth, and pressed down his brows, so as to defy any divination of his feelings under that kind of stroking.

'And what may that need be?' he said, after a moment's pause. In his heart he was tempted by the hinted opportunity of applying his invention.

'I want a very delicate miniature device taken from certain fables of the poets, which you will know how to combine for me. It must be painted on a wooden case - I will show you the size - in the form of a triptych. The inside may be simple gilding: it is on the outside I want the device. It is a favourite subject with you Florentines - the triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne; but I want it treated in a new way. A story in Ovid will give you the necessary hints. The young Bacchus must be seated in a ship, his head bound with dusters of grapes, and a spear entwined with vine-leaves in his hand: dark-berried ivy must wind about the masts and sails, the oars must be thyrsi, and flowers must wreath themselves about the poop; leopards and tigers must be crouching before him, and dolphins must be sporting round. But I want to have the fair-haired Ariadne with him, made immortal with her golden crown - that is not in Ovid's story, but no matter, you will conceive it all - and above there must be young Loves, such as you know how to paint, shooting with roses at the points of their arrows -'

'Say no more!' said Piero. 'I have Ovid in the vulgar tongue. Find me the passage. I love not to be choked with other men's thoughts. You may come in.'

Piero led the way through the first room, where a basket of eggs was deposited on the open hearth, near a heap of broken egg-shells and a bank of ashes. In strange keeping with that sordid litter, there was a low bedstead of carved ebony, covered carelessly with a piece of rich oriental carpet, that looked as if it had served to cover the steps to a Madonna's throne; and a carved cassone, or large chest, with painted devices on its sides and lid. There was hardly any other furniture in

the large room, except casts, wooden steps, easels and rough boxes, all festooned with cobwebs.

The next room was still larger, but it was also much more crowded. Apparently Piero was keeping the Festa, for the double door underneath the window which admitted the painter's light from above, was thrown open, and showed a garden, or rather thicket, in which fig-trees and vines grew in tangled trailing wildness among nettles and hemlocks, and a tall cypress lifted its dark head from a stifling mass of yellowish mulberry-leaves. It seemed as if that dank luxuriance had begun to penetrate even within the walls of the wide and lofty room; for in one corner, amidst a confused heap of carved marble fragments and rusty armour, tufts of long grass and dark feathery fennel had made their way, and a large stone vase, tilted on one side, seemed to be pouring out the ivy that streamed around. All about the walls hung pen and oil sketches of fantastic sea-monsters; dances of satyrs and maenads; Saint Margaret's resurrection out of the devouring dragons; Madonnas with the supernal light upon them; studies of plants and grotesque heads; and on irregular rough shelves a few books were scattered among great drooping bunches of corn, bullocks' horns, pieces of dried honeycomb, stones with patches of rare-coloured lichen skulls and bones, peacocks' feathers, and large birds' wings. Rising from amongst the dirty litter of the floor were lay figures: one in the frock of a Vallombrosan monk, strangely surmounted by a helmet with barred visor, another smothered with brocade and skins hastily tossed over it. Amongst this heterogeneous still life, several speckled and white pigeons were perched or strutting, too tame to fly at the entrance of men; three corpulent toads were crawling in an intimate friendly way near the door-stone- and a white rabbit, apparently the model for that which was frightening Cupid in the picture of Mars and Venus placed on the central easel, was twitching its nose with much content on a box full of bran.

'And now, Messer Greco,' said Piero, making a sign to Tito that he might sit down on a low stool near the door, and then standing over him with folded arms, 'don't be trying to see everything at once, like Messer Domeneddio, but let me know how large you would have this same triptych.'

Tito indicated the required dimensions, and Piero marked them on a piece of paper.

'And now for the book,' said Piero, reaching down a manuscript volume.

'There's nothing about the Ariadne there,' said Tito, giving him the passage; 'but you will remember I want the crowned Ariadne by the side of the young Bacchus: she must have golden hair.'

'Ha!' said Piero, abruptly, pursing up his lips again. 'And you want them to be likenesses, eh?' he added, looking down into Tito's face.

Tito laughed and blushed. 'I know you are great at portraits, Messer Piero; but I could not ask Ariadne to sit for you, because the painting is a secret.'

'There it is! I want her to sit to me. Giovanni Vespucci wants me to paint him a picture of Oedipus and Antigone at Colonos, as he has expounded it to me: I have a fancy for the subject, and I want Bardo and his daughter to sit for it. Now, you ask them; and then I'll put the likeness into Ariadne.'

'Agreed, if I can prevail with them. And your price for the Bacchus and Ariadne?'

'Baie! If you get them to let me paint them, that will pay me. I'd rather not have your money: you may pay for the case.'

'And when shall I sit for you?' said Tito; 'for if we have one likeness, we must have two.'

'I don't want your likeness; I've got it already,' said Piero, 'only I've made you look frightened. I must take the fright out of it for Bacchus.'

As he was speaking, Piero laid down the book and went to look among some paintings, propped with their faces against the wall. He returned with an oil-sketch in his hand.

'I call this as good a bit of portrait as I ever did,' he said, looking at it as he advanced. 'Yours is a face that expresses fear well, because it's naturally a bright one. I noticed it the first time I saw you. The rest of the picture is hardly sketched; but I've painted you in thoroughly.'

Piero turned the sketch, and held it towards Tito's eyes. He saw himself with his right hand uplifted, holding a wine-cup, in the attitude of triumphant joy, but with his face turned away from the cup with an expression of such intense fear in the dilated eyes and pallid lips, that he felt a cold stream through his veins, as if he were being thrown into sympathy with his imaged self.

'You are beginning to look like it already,' said Piero, with a short laugh, moving the picture away again. 'He's seeing a ghost - that fine young man. I shall finish it some day, when I have settled what sort of ghost is the most terrible - whether it should look solid, like a dead man come to life, or half transparent, like a mist.'

Tito, rather ashamed of himself for a sudden sensitiveness strangely opposed to his usual easy self-command, said carelessly -

'That is a subject after your own heart, Messer Piero - a revel interrupted by a ghost. You seem to love the blending of the terrible with the gay. I suppose that is the reason your shelves are so well furnished with death's-heads, while you are painting those roguish Loves who are running away with the armour of Mars. I begin to think you are a Cynic philosopher in the pleasant disguise of a cunning painter.'

'Not I, Messer Greco; a philosopher is the last sort of animal I should choose to resemble. I find it enough to live, without spinning lies to account for life. Fowls cackle, asses bray, women chatter, and philosophers spin false reasons - that's the effect the sight of the world brings out of them. Well, I am an animal that paints instead of cackling, or braying, or spinning lies. And now, I think, our business is done; you'll keep to your side of the bargain about the Oedipus and Antigone?'

'I will do my best,' said Tito - on this strong hint, immediately moving towards the door.

'And you'll let me know at Nello's. No need to come here again.'

'I understand,' said Tito, laughingly, lifting his hand in sign of friendly parting.