

## Chapter 20 - The Day of the Betrothal

It was the last week of the Carnival, and the streets of Florence were at their fullest and noisiest: there were the masqued processions, chanting songs, indispensable now they had once been introduced by Lorenzo the Magnificent; there was the favourite rigoletto, or round dance, footed 'in piazza' under the blue frosty sky; there were practical jokes of all sorts, from throwing comfits to throwing stones - especially stones. For the boys and striplings, always a strong element in Florentine crowds, became at the height of Carnival-time as loud and unmanageable as tree-cricket, and it was their immemorial privilege to bar the way with poles to all passengers, until a tribute had been paid towards furnishing those lovers of strong sensations with suppers and bonfires: to conclude with the standing entertainment of stone-throwing, which was not entirely monotonous, since the consequent maiming was various, and it was not always a single person who was killed. So that the pleasures of the Carnival were of a checkered kind, and if a painter were called upon to represent them truly, he would have to make a picture in which there would be so much grossness and barbarity that it must be turned with its face to the wall, except when it was taken down for the grave historical purpose of justifying a reforming zeal which, in ignorance of the facts, might be unfairly condemned for its narrowness. Still there was much of that more innocent picturesque merriment which is never wanting among a people with quick animal spirits and sensitive organs: there was not the heavy sottishness which belongs to the thicker northern blood, nor the stealthy fierceness which in the more southern regions of the peninsula makes the brawl lead to the dagger-thrust.

It was the high morning, but the merry spirits of the Carnival were still inclined to lounge and recapitulate the last night's jests, when Tito Melema was walking at a brisk pace on the way to the Via de' Bardi. Young Bernardo Dovizi, who now looks at us out of Raphael's portrait as the keen-eyed Cardinal da Bibbiena, was with him; and as they went, they held animated talk about some subject that had evidently no relation to the sights and sounds through which they were pushing their way along the Por' Santa Maria. Nevertheless, as they discussed, smiled, and gesticulated, they both, from time to time, cast quick glances around them, and at the turning towards the Lung' Arno, leading to the Ponte Rubaconte, Tito had become aware, in one of these rapid surveys, that there was some one not far off him by whom he very much desired not to be recognised at that moment. His time and thoughts were thoroughly preoccupied, for he was looking forward to a unique occasion in his life: he was preparing for his betrothal, which was to take place on the evening of this very day. The ceremony had been resolved upon rather suddenly; for although preparations towards the marriage had been going forward for some time - chiefly in the application of Tito's florins to the fitting up of

rooms in Bardo's dwelling, which, the library excepted, had always been scantily furnished - it had been intended to defer both the betrothal and the marriage until after Easter, when Tito's year of probation, insisted on by Bernardo del Nero, would have been complete. But when an express proposition had come, that Tito should follow the Cardinal Giovanni to Rome to help Bernardo Dovizi with his superior knowledge of Greek in arranging a library, and there was no possibility of declining what lay so plainly on the road to advancement, he had become urgent in his entreaties that the betrothal might take place before his departure: there would be the less delay before the marriage on his return, and it would be less painful to part if he and Romola were outwardly as well as inwardly pledged to each other - if he had a claim which defied Messer Bernardo or any one else to nullify it. For the betrothal, at which rings were exchanged and mutual contracts were signed, made more than half the legality of marriage, to be completed on a separate occasion by the nuptial benediction. Romola's feeling had met Tito's in this wish, and the consent of the elders had been won.

And now Tito was hastening, amidst arrangements for his departure the next day, to snatch a morning visit to Romola, to say and hear any last words that were needful to be said before their meeting for the betrothal in the evening. It was not a time when any recognition could be pleasant that was at all likely to detain him; still less a recognition by Tessa. And it was unmistakably Tessa whom he had caught sight of moving along, with a timid and forlorn look, towards that very turn of the Lung' Arno which he was just rounding. As he continued his talk with the young Dovizi, he had an uncomfortable undercurrent of consciousness which told him that Tessa had seen him and would certainly follow him: there was no escaping her along this direct road by the Arno, and over the Ponte Rubaconte. But she would not dare to speak to him or approach him while he was not alone, and he would continue to keep Dovizi with him till they reached Bardo's door. He quickened his pace, and took up new threads of talk; but all the while the sense that Tessa was behind him, though he had no physical evidence of the fact, grew stronger and stronger; it was very irritating - perhaps all the more so because a certain tenderness and pity for the poor little thing made the determination to escape without any visible notice of her, a not altogether agreeable resource. Yet Tito persevered and carried his companion to the door, cleverly managing his 'addio' without turning his face in a direction where it was possible for him to see an importunate pair of blue eyes; and as he went up the stone steps, he tried to get rid of unpleasant thoughts by saying to himself that after all Tessa might not have seen him, or, if she had, might not have followed him.

But - perhaps because that possibility could not be relied on strongly - when the visit was over, he came out of the doorway with a quick step

and an air of unconsciousness as to anything that might be on his right hand or his left. Our eyes are so constructed, however, that they take in a wide angle without asking any leave of our will; and Tito knew that there was a little figure in a white hood standing near the doorway - knew it quite well, before he felt a hand laid on his arm. It was a real grasp, and not a light, timid touch; for poor Tessa, seeing his rapid step, had started forward with a desperate effort. But when he stopped and turned towards her, her face wore a frightened look, as if she dreaded the effect of her boldness.

'Tessa!' said Tito, with more sharpness in his voice than she had ever heard in it before. 'Why are you here? You must not follow me - you must not stand about door-places waiting for me.'

Her blue eyes widened with tears, and she said nothing. Tito was afraid of something worse than ridicule, if he were seen in the Via de' Bardi with a girlish contadina looking pathetically at him. It was a street of high silent-looking dwellings, not of traffic; but Bernardo del Nero, or some one almost as dangerous, might come up at any moment. Even if it had not been the day of his betrothal, the incident would have been awkward and annoying. Yet it would be brutal - it was impossible - to drive Tessa away with harsh words. That accursed folly of his with the cerretano - that it should have lain buried in a quiet way for months, and now start up before him as this unseasonable crop of vexation! He could not speak harshly, but he spoke hurriedly.

'Tessa, I cannot - must not talk to you here. I will go to the bridge and wait for you there. Follow me slowly.'

He turned and walked fast to the Ponte Rubaconte, and there leaned against the wall of one of the quaint little houses that rise at even distances on the bridge, looking towards the way by which Tessa would come. It would have softened a much harder heart than Tito's to see the little thing advancing with her round face much paled and saddened since he had parted from it at the door of the 'Nunziata.' Happily it was the least frequented of the bridges, and there were scarcely any passengers on it at this moment. He lost no time in speaking as soon as she came near him.

'Now, Tessa, I have very little time. You must not cry. Why did you follow me this morning? You must not do so again.' 'I thought,' said Tessa, speaking in a whisper, and struggling against a sob that would rise immediately at this new voice of Tito's - 'I thought you wouldn't be so long before you came to take care of me again. And the patrigno beats me, and I can't bear it any longer. And always when I come for a holiday I walk about to find you, and I can't. Oh, please don't send me away from you again! It has been so long, and I cry so now, because

you never come to me. I can't help it, for the days are so long, and I don't mind about the goats and kids, or anything - and I can't -'

The sobs came fast now, and the great tears. Tito felt that he could not do otherwise than comfort her. Send her away - yes; that he must do, at once. But it was all the more impossible to tell her anything that would leave her in a state of hopeless grief. He saw new trouble in the background, but the difficulty of the moment was too pressing for him to weigh distant consequences.

'Tessa, my little one,' he said, in his old caressing tones, 'you must not cry. Bear with the cross patrigno a little longer. I will come back to you. But I'm going now to Rome - a long, long way off. I shall come back in a few weeks, and then I promise you to come and see you. Promise me to be good and wait for me.'

It was the well-remembered voice again, and the mere sound was half enough to soothe Tessa. She looked up at him with trusting eyes, that still glittered with tears, sobbing all the while, in spite of her utmost efforts to obey him. Again he said, in a gentle voice -

'Promise me, my Tessa.'

'Yes,' she whispered. 'But you won't be long?'

'No, not long. But I must go now. And remember what I told you, Tessa. Nobody must know that you ever see me, else you will lose me for ever. And now, when I have left you, go straight home, and never follow me again. Wait till I come to you. Good-bye, my little Tessa: I will come.'

There was no help for it; he must turn and leave her without looking behind him to see how she bore it, for he had no time to spare. When he did look round he was in the Via de' Benci, where there was no seeing what was happening on the bridge; but Tessa was too trusting and obedient not to do just what he had told her.

Yes, the difficulty was at an end for that day; yet this return of Tessa to him, at a moment when it was impossible for him to put an end to all difficulty with her by undeceiving her, was an unpleasant incident to carry in his memory. But Tito's mind was just now thoroughly penetrated with a hopeful first love, associated with all happy prospects flattering to his ambition; and that future necessity of grieving Tessa could be scarcely more to him than the far-off cry of some little suffering animal buried in the thicket, to a merry cavalcade in the sunny plain. When, for the second time that day, Tito was hastening across the Ponte Rubaconte, the thought of Tessa caused no perceptible diminution of his happiness. He was well muffled in his

mantle, less, perhaps, to protect him from the cold than from the additional notice that would have been drawn upon him by his dainty apparel. He leaped up the stone steps by two at a time, and said hurriedly to Maso, who met him -

'Where is the damigella?'

'In the library; she is quite ready, and Monna Brigida and Messer Bernardo are already there with Ser Braccio, but none of the rest of the company.'

'Ask her to give me a few minutes alone; I will await her in the salotto.'

Tito entered a room which had been fitted up in the utmost contrast with the half-pallid, half-sombre tints of the library. The walls were brightly frescoed with 'caprices' of nymphs and loves sporting under the blue among flowers and birds. The only furniture besides the red leather seats and the central table were two tall white vases, and a young faun playing the flute, modelled by a promising youth named Michelangelo Buonarotti. It was a room that gave a sense of being in the sunny open air.

Tito kept his mantle round him, and looked towards the door. It was not long before Romola entered, all white and gold, more than ever like a tall lily. Her white silk garment was bound by a golden girdle, which fell with large tassels; and above that was the rippling gold of her hair, surmounted by the white mist of her long veil, which was fastened on her brow by a band of pearls, the gift of Bernardo del Nero, and was now parted off her face so that it all floated backward.

'Regina mia!' said Tito, as he took her hand and kissed it, still keeping his mantle round him. He could not help going backward to look at her again, while she stood in calm delight, with that exquisite self-consciousness which rises under the gaze of admiring love.

'Romola, will you show me the next room now?' said Tito checking himself with the remembrance that the time might be short. 'You said I should see it when you had arranged everything.'

Without speaking, she led the way into a long narrow room, painted brightly like the other, but only with birds and flowers. The furniture in it was all old; there were old faded objects for feminine use or ornament, arranged in an open cabinet between the two narrow windows; above the cabinet was the portrait of Romola's mother; and below this, on the top of the cabinet, stood the crucifix which Romola had brought from San Marco.

'I have brought something under my mantle,' said Tito, smiling; and throwing off the large loose garment, he showed the little tabernacle which had been painted by Piero di Cosimo. The painter had carried out Tito's intention charmingly, and so far had atoned for his long delay. 'Do you know what this is for, my Romola?' added Tito, taking her by the hand, and leading her towards the cabinet. 'It is a little shrine, which is to hide away from you for ever that remembrancer of sadness. You have done with sadness now; and we will bury all images of it - bury them in a tomb of joy. See!'

A slight quiver passed across Romola's face as Tito took hold of the crucifix. But she had no wish to prevent his purpose; on the contrary, she herself wished to subdue certain importunate memories and questionings which still flitted like unexplained shadows across her happier thought.

He opened the triptych and placed the crucifix within the central space; then closing it again, taking out the key, and setting the little tabernacle in the spot where the crucifix had stood, said -

'Now, Romola, look and see if you are satisfied with the portraits old Piero has made of us. Is it not a dainty device? and the credit of choosing it is mine.'

'Ah! it is you - it is perfect!' said Romola, looking with moist joyful eyes at the miniature Bacchus, with his purple dusters. 'And I am Ariadne, and you are crowning me! Yes, it is true, Tito; you have crowned my poor life.'

They held each other's hands while she spoke, and both looked at their imaged selves. But the reality was far more beautiful; she all lily-white and golden, and he with his dark glowing beauty above the purple red-bordered tunic.

'And it was our good strange Piero who painted it?' said Romola. 'Did you put it into his head to paint me as Antigone, that he might have my likeness for this?'

'No, it was he who made my getting leave for him to paint you and your father, a condition of his doing this for me.'

'Ah! I see now what it was you gave up your precious ring for. I perceived you had some cunning plan to give me pleasure.'

Tito did not blench. Romola's little illusions about himself had long ceased to cause him anything but satisfaction. He only smiled and said -

'I might have spared my ring; Piero will accept no money from me; he thinks himself paid by painting you. And now, while I am away, you will look every day at those pretty symbols of our life together - the ship on the calm sea, and the ivy that never withers, and those Loves that have left off wounding us and shower soft petals that are like our kisses; and the leopards and tigers, they are the troubles of your life that are all quelled now; and the strange sea-monsters, with their merry eyes - let us see - they are the dull passages in the heavy books, which have begun to be amusing since we have sat by each other.'

'Tito mio!' said Romola, in a half-laughing voice of love; 'but you will give me the key?' she added, holding out her hand for it.

'Not at all!' said Tito, with playful decision, opening his scarsella and dropping in the little key. 'I shall drown it in the Arno.'

'But if I ever wanted to look at the crucifix again?'

'Ah! for that very reason it is hidden - hidden by these images of youth and joy.'

He pressed a light kiss on her brow, and she said no more, ready to submit, like all strong souls, when she felt no valid reason for resistance.

And then they joined the waiting company, which made a dignified little procession as it passed along the Ponte Rubaconte towards Santa Croce. Slowly it passed, for Bardo, unaccustomed for years to leave his own house, walked with a more timid step than usual; and that slow pace suited well with the gouty dignity of Messer Bartolommeo Scala, who graced the occasion by his presence, along with his daughter Alessandra. It was customary to have very long troops of kindred and friends at the spozalizio, or betrothal and it had even been found necessary in time past to limit the number by law to no more than four hundred - two hundred on each side; for since the guests were all feasted after this initial ceremony, as well as after the nozze, or marriage, the very first stage of matrimony had become a ruinous expense, as that scholarly Benedict, Leonardo Bruno, complained in his own case. But Bardo, who in his poverty had kept himself proudly free from any appearance of claiming the advantages attached to a powerful family name, would have no invitations given on the strength of mere friendship; and the modest procession of twenty that followed the sposi were, with three or four exceptions, friends of Bardo's and Tito's selected on personal grounds.

Bernardo del Nero walked as a vanguard before Bardo who was led on the right by Tito, while Romola held her father's other hand. Bardo had himself been married at Santa Croce, and had insisted on

Romola's being betrothed and married there, rather than in the little church of Santa Lucia close by their house, because he had a complete mental vision of the grand church where he hoped that a burial might be granted him among the Florentines who had deserved well. Happily the way was short and direct, and lay aloof from the loudest riot of the Carnival, if only they could return before any dances or shows began in the great piazza of Santa Croce. The west was red as they passed the bridge, and shed a mellow light on the pretty procession, which had a touch of solemnity in the presence of the blind father. But when the ceremony was over, and Tito and Romola came out on to the broad steps of the church, with the golden links of destiny on their fingers, the evening had deepened into struggling starlight, and the servants had their torches lit.

While they came out, a strange dreary chant, as of a Miserere, met their ears, and they saw that at the extreme end of the piazza there seemed to be a stream of people impelled by something approaching from the Borgo de' Greci.

'It is one of their masqued processions, I suppose,' said Tito, who was now alone with Romola, while Bernardo took charge of Bardo.

And as he spoke there came slowly into view, at a height far above the heads of the on-lookers, a huge and ghastly image of Winged Time with his scythe and hour-glass, surrounded by his winged children, the Hours. He was mounted on a high car completely covered with black, and the bullocks that drew the car were also covered with black, their horns alone standing out white above the gloom; so that in the sombre shadow of the houses it seemed to those at a distance as if Time and his children were apparitions floating through the air. And behind them came what looked like a troop of the sheeted dead gliding above blackness. And as they glided slowly, they chanted in a wailing strain.'

A cold horror seized on Romola, for at the first moment it seemed as if her brother's vision, which could never be effaced from her mind, was being half fulfilled. She clung to Tito, who, divining what was in her thoughts, said -

'What dismal fooling sometimes pleases your Florentines! Doubtless this is an invention of Piero di Cosimo, who loves such grim merriment.'

'Tito, I wish it had not happened. It will deepen the images of that vision which I would fain be rid of.'

'Nay, Romola, you will look only at the images of our happiness now. I have locked all sadness away from you.'

'But it is still there - it is only hidden,' said Romola, in a low tone, hardly conscious that she spoke.

'See, they are all gone now!' said Tito. 'You will forget this ghastly mummery when we are in the light, and can see each other's eyes. My Ariadne must never look backward now - only forward to Easter, when she will triumph with her Care-dispeller.'