Chapter 25 - Outside the Duomo

While Baldassarre was possessed by the voice of Savonarola, he had not noticed that another man had entered through the doorway behind him, and stood not far off observing him. It was Piero di Cosimo, who took no heed of the preaching, having come solely to look at the escaped prisoner. During the pause, in which the preacher and his audience had given themselves up to inarticulate emotion, the new-comer advanced and touched Baldassarre on the arm. He looked round with the tears still slowly rolling down his face, but with a vigorous sigh, as if he had done with that outburst. The painter spoke to him in a low tone -

'Shall I cut your cords for you? I have heard how you were made prisoner.'

Baldassarre did not reply immediately; he glanced suspiciously at the officious stranger. At last he said, 'If you will.'

'Better come outside,' said Piero.

Baldassarre again looked at him suspiciously; and Piero, partly guessing his thought, smiled, took out a knife, and cut the cords. He began to think that the idea of the prisoner's madness was not improbable, there was something so peculiar in the expression of his face. 'Well,' he thought, 'if he does any mischief, he'll soon get tied up again. The poor devil shall have a chance, at least.'

'You are afraid of me,' he said again, in an undertone; 'you don't want to tell me anything about yourself.'

Baldassarre was folding his arms in enjoyment of the long-absent muscular sensation. He answered Piero with a less suspicious look and a tone which had some quiet decision in it.

'No, I have nothing to tell.'

'As you please,' said Piero, 'but perhaps you want shelter, and may not know how hospitable we Florentines are to visitors with torn doublets and empty stomachs. There's an hospital for poor travellers outside all our gates, and, if you liked, I could put you in the way to one. There's no danger from your French soldier. He has been sent off.'

Baldassarre nodded, and turned in silent acceptance of the offer, and he and Piero left the church together.

'You wouldn't like to sit to me for your portrait, should you?' said Piero, as they went along the Via dell' Oriuolo, on the way to the gate of Santa Croce. 'I am a painter: I would give you money to get your portrait.'

The suspicion returned into Baldassarre's glance, as he looked at Piero, and said decidedly, 'No.'

'Ah!' said the painter, curtly. 'Well, go straight on, and you'll find the Porta Santa Croce, and outside it there's an hospital for travellers. So you'll not accept any service from me?'

'I give you thanks for what you have done already. I need no more.'

'It is well,' said Piero, with a shrug, and they turned away from each other.

'A mysterious old tiger' thought the artist, 'well worth painting. Ugly - with deep lines - looking as if the plough and the harrow had gone over his heart. A fine contrast to my bland and smiling Messer Greco - my Bacco trionfante,' who has married the fair Antigone in contradiction to all history and fitness. Aha! his scholar's blood curdled uncomfortably at the old fellow's clutch! '

When Piero re-entered the Piazza del Duomo the multitude who had been listening to Fra Girolamo were pouring out from all the doors, and the haste they made to go on their several ways was a proof how important they held the preaching which had detained them from the other occupations of the day. The artist leaned against an angle of the Baptistery and watched the departing crowd, delighting in the variety of the garb and of the keen characteristic faces - faces such as Masaccio had painted more than fifty years before: such as Domenico Ghirlandajo had not yet quite left off painting.

This morning was a peculiar occasion, and the Frate's audience, always multifarious, had represented even more completely than usual the various classes and political parties of Florence. There were men of high birth, accustomed to public charges at home and abroad, who had become newly conspicuous not only as enemies of the Medici and friends of popular government, but as thorough Piagnoni, espousing to the utmost the doctrines and practical teaching of the Frate, and frequenting San Marco as the seat of another Samuel: some of them men of authoritati6e and handsome presence, like Francesco Valori, and perhaps also of a hot and arrogant temper, very much gratified by an immediate divine authority for bringing about freedom in their own way; others, like Soderini, with less of the ardent Piagnone, and more of the wise politician. There were men, also of family, like Piero Capponi, simply brave undoctrinal lovers of a sober

republican liberty, who preferred fighting to arguing, and had no particular reasons for thinking any ideas false that kept out the Medici and made room for public spirit. At their elbows were doctors of law whose studies of Accursius and his brethren had not so entirely consumed their ardour as to prevent them from becoming enthusiastic Piagnoni: Messer Luca Corsini himself, for example, who on a memorable occasion yet to come was to raise his learned arms in street stone-throwing for the cause of religion, freedom, and the Frate. And among the dignities who carried their black lucco or furred mantle with an air of habitual authority, there was an abundant sprinkling of men with more contemplative and sensitive faces: scholars inheriting such high names as Strozzi and Acciajoli, who were already minded to take the cowl and join the community of San Marco; artists, wrought to a new and higher ambition by the teaching of Savonarola, like that young painter who had lately surpassed himself in his fresco of the divine child on the wall of the Frate's bare cell - unconscious yet that he would one day himself wear the tonsure and the cowl, and be called Fra Bartolommeo. There was the mystic poet Girolamo Benevieni hastening, perhaps, to carry tidings of the beloved Frate's speedy coming to his friend Pico della Mirandola, who was never to see the light of another morning. There were well-born women attired with such scrupulous plainness that their more refined grace was the chief distinction between them and their less aristocratic sisters. There was a predominant proportion of the genuine popolani or middle class, belonging both to the Major and Minor Arts, conscious of purses threatened by war-taxes. And more striking and various, perhaps, than all the other classes of the Frate's disciples, there was the long stream of poorer tradesmen and artisans, whose faith and hope in his Divine message varied from the rude and undiscriminating trust in him as the friend of the poor and the enemy of the luxurious oppressive rich, to that eager tasting of all the subtleties of biblical interpretation which takes a peculiarly strong hold on the sedentary artisan, illuminating the long dim spaces beyond the board where he stitches, with a pale flame that seems to him the light of Divine science.

But among these various disciples of the Frate were scattered many who were not in the least his disciples. Some were Mediceans who had already, from motives of fear and policy, begun to show the presiding spirit of the popular party a feigned deference. Others were sincere advocates of a free government, but regarded Savonarola simply as an ambitious monk - half sagacious, half fanatical - who had made himself a powerful instrument with the people, and must be accepted as an important social fact. There were even some of his bitter enemies: members of the old aristocratic anti-Medicean party - determined to try and get the reins once more tight in the hands of certain chief families; or else licentious young men, who detested him as the killjoy of Florence. For the sermons in the Duomo had already

become political incidents, attracting the ears of curiosity and malice, as well as of faith. The men of ideas, like young Niccolo Macchiavelli, went to observe and write reports to friends away in country villas; the men of appetites, like Dolfo Spini, bent on hunting down the Frate, as a public nuisance who made game scarce, went to feed their hatred and lie in wait for grounds of accusation.

Perhaps, while no preacher ever had a more massive influence than Savonarola, no preacher ever had more heterogeneous materials to work upon. And one secret of the massive influence lay in the highly mixed character of his preaching. Baldassarre, wrought into an ecstasy of self-martyring revenge, was only an extreme case among the partial and narrow sympathies of that audience. In Savonarola's preaching there were strains that appealed to the very finest susceptibilities of men's natures, and there were elements that gratified low egoism, tickled gossiping curiosity, and fascinated timorous superstition. His need of personal predominance, his labyrinthine allegorical interpretations of the Scriptures, his enigmatic visions, and his false certitude about the Divine intentions, never ceased, in his own large soul, to be ennobled by that fervid piety, that passionate sense of the infinite, that active sympathy, that clear-sighted demand for the subjection of selfish interests to the general good, which he had in common with the greatest of mankind. But for the mass of his audience all the pregnancy of his preaching lay in his strong assertion of supernatural claims, in his denunciatory visions, in the false certitude which gave his sermons the interest of a political bulletin; and having once held that audience in his mastery, it was necessary to his nature - it was necessary for their welfare - that he should keep the mastery. The effect was inevitable. No man ever struggled to retain power over a mixed multitude without suffering vitiation; his standard must be their lower needs and not his own best insight.

The mysteries of human character have seldom been presented in a way more fitted to check the judgments of facile knowingness than in Girolamo Savonarola; but we can give him a reverence that needs no shutting of the eyes to fact, if we regard his life as a drama in which there were great inward modifications accompanying the outward changes. And up to this period, when his more direct action on political affairs had only just begun, it is probable that his imperious need of ascendancy had burned undiscernibly in the strong flame of his zeal for God and man.

It was the fashion of old, when an ox was led out for sacrifice to Jupiter, to chalk the dark spots, and give the offering a false show of unblemished whiteness. Let us fling away the chalk, and boldly say, - the victim is spotted, but it is not therefore in vain that his mighty heart is laid on the altar of men's highest hopes.