

Chapter 26 - The Garment of Fear

At six o'clock that evening most people in Florence were glad the entrance of the new Charlemagne was fairly over. Doubtless when the roll of drums, the blast of trumpets, and the tramp of horses along the Pisan road began to mingle with the pealing of the excited bells, it was a grand moment for those who were stationed on turreted roofs, and could see the long-winding terrible pomp on the background of the green hills and valley. There was no sunshine to light up the splendour of banners, and spears, and plumes, and silken surcoats, but there was no thick cloud of dust to hide it, and as the picked troops advanced into close view, they could be seen all the more distinctly for the absence of dancing glitter. Tall and tough Scotch archers, Swiss halberdiers fierce and ponderous, nimble Gascons ready to wheel and climb, cavalry in which each man looked like a knight-errant with his indomitable spear and charger - it was satisfactory to be assured that they would injure nobody but the enemies of God! With that confidence at heart it was a less dubious pleasure to look at the array of strength and splendour in nobles and knights, and youthful pages of choice lineage - at the bossed and jewelled sword-hilts, at the satin scarfs embroidered with strange symbolical devices of pious or gallant meaning, at the gold chains and jewelled aigrettes, at the gorgeous horse-trappings and brocaded mantles and at the transcendent canopy carried by select youths above the head of the Most Christian King. To sum up with an old diarist, whose spelling and diction halted a little behind the wonders of this royal visit, - 'fu gran magnificenza.'

But for the Signoria, who had been waiting on their platform against the gates, and had to march out at the right moment, with their orator in front of them, to meet the mighty guest, the grandeur of the scene had been somewhat screened by unpleasant sensations. If Messer Luca Corsini could have had a brief Latin welcome depending from his mouth in legible characters, it would have been less confusing when the rain came on, and created an impatience in men and horses that broke off the delivery of his well-studied periods, and reduced the representatives of the scholarly city to offer a makeshift welcome in impromptu French. But that sudden confusion had created a great opportunity for Tito. As one of the secretaries he was among the officials who were stationed behind the Signoria, and with whom these highest dignities were promiscuously thrown when pressed upon by the horses.

'Somebody step forward and say a few words in French,' said Soderini. But no one of high importance chose to risk a second failure. 'You, Francesco Gaddi - you can speak.' But Gaddi, distrusting his own promptness, hung back, and pushing Tito, said, 'You, Melema.'

Tito stepped forward in an instant, and, with the air of profound deference that came as naturally to him as walking, said the few needful words in the name of the Signoria; then gave way gracefully, and let the king pass on. His presence of mind, which had failed him in the terrible crisis of the morning, had been a ready instrument this time. It was an excellent livery servant that never forsook him when danger was not visible. But when he was complimented on his opportune service, he laughed it off as a thing of no moment, and to those who had not witnessed it, let Gaddi have the credit of the improvised welcome. No wonder Tito was popular: the touchstone by which men try us is most often their own vanity.

Other things besides the oratorical welcome had turned out rather worse than had been expected. If everything had happened according to ingenious preconceptions, the Florentine procession of clergy and laity would not have found their way choked up and been obliged to take a make-shift course through the back streets, so as to meet the king at the Cathedral only. Also, if the young monarch under the canopy, seated on his charger with his lance upon his thigh, had looked more like a Charlemagne and less like a hastily modelled grotesque, the imagination of his admirers would have been much assisted. It might have been wished that the scourge of Italian wickedness and 'Champion of the honour of women' had had a less miserable leg, and only the normal sum of toes; that his mouth had been of a less reptilian width of slit, his nose and head of a less exorbitant outline. But the thin leg rested on cloth of gold and pearls, and the face was only an interruption of a few square inches in the midst of black velvet and gold, and the blaze of rubies, and the brilliant tints of the embroidered and bepearled canopy, - 'fu gran magnificenza.'

And the people had cried Francia, Francia! with an enthusiasm proportioned to the splendour of the canopy which they had torn to pieces as their spoil, according to immemorial custom; royal lips had duly kissed the altar; and after all mischances the royal person and retinue were lodged in the Palace of the Via Larga, the rest of the nobles and gentry were dispersed among the great houses of Florence, and the terrible soldiery were encamped in the Prato and other open quarters. The business of the day was ended.

But the streets still presented a surprising aspect, such as Florentines had not seen before under the November stars. Instead of a gloom unbroken except by a lamp burning feebly here and there before a saintly image at the street corners, or by a stream of redder light from an open doorway, there were lamps suspended at the windows of all houses, so that men could walk along no less securely and commodiously than by day, - 'fu gran magnificenza.'

Along those illuminated streets Tito Melema was walking at about eight o'clock in the evening, on his way homeward. He had been exerting himself throughout the day under the pressure of hidden anxieties, and had at last made his escape unnoticed from the midst of after-supper gaiety. Once at leisure thoroughly to face and consider his circumstances, he hoped that he could so adjust himself to them and to all probabilities as to get rid of his childish fear. If he had only not been wanting in the presence of mind necessary to recognise Baldassarre under that surprise! - it would have been happier for him on all accounts; for he still winced under the sense that he was deliberately inflicting suffering on his father: he would very much have preferred that Baldassarre should be prosperous and happy. But he had left himself no second path now: there could be no conflict any longer: the only thing he had to do was to take care of himself.

While these thoughts were in his mind he was advancing from the Piazza di Santa Croce along the Via dei Benci, and as he neared the angle turning into the Borgo Santa Croce his ear was struck by a music which was not that of evening revelry, but of vigorous labour - the music of the anvil. Tito gave a slight start and quickened his pace, for the sounds had suggested a welcome thought. He knew that they came from the workshop of Niccolo Caparra, famous resort of all Florentines who cared for curious and beautiful iron-work.

'What makes the giant at work so late?' thought Tito. 'But so much the better for me. I can do that little bit of business to-night instead of to-morrow morning.'

Preoccupied as he was, he could not help pausing a moment in admiration as he came in front of the workshop. The wide doorway, standing at the truncated angle of a great block or 'isle' of houses, was surmounted by a loggia roofed with fluted tiles, and supported by stone columns with roughly carved capitals. Against the red light framed in by the outline of the fluted tiles and columns stood in black relief the grand figure of Niccolo, with his huge arms in rhythmic rise and fall, first hiding and then disclosing the profile of his firm mouth and powerful brow. Two slighter ebony figures, one at the anvil, the other at the bellows, served to set off his superior massiveness.

Tito darkened the doorway with a very different outline standing in silence, since it was useless to speak until Niccolo should deign to pause and notice him. That was not until the smith had beaten the head of an axe to the due sharpness of edge and dismissed it from his anvil. But in the meantime Tito had satisfied himself by a glance round the shop that the object of which he was in search had not disappeared.

Niccolo gave an unceremonious but good-humoured nod as he turned from the anvil and rested his hammer on his hip.

'What is it, Messer Tito? Business?'

'Assuredly, Niccolo; else I should not have ventured to interrupt you when you are working out of hours, since I take that as a sign that your work is pressing.'

'I've been at the same work all day - making axes and spear-heads. And every fool that has passed my shop has put his pumpkin-head in to say, 'Niccolo, wilt thou not come and see the King of France and his soldiers?' and I've answered, 'No: I don't want to see their faces - I want to see their backs.'

'Are you making arms for the citizens, then, Niccolo, that they may have something better than rusty scythes and spits in case of an uproar?'

'We shall see. Arms are good, and Florence is likely to want them. The Frate tells us we shall get Pisa again, and I hold with the Frate; but I should be glad to know how the promise is to be fulfilled, if we don't get plenty of good weapons forged? The Frate sees a long way before him; that I believe. But he doesn't see birds caught with winking at them, as some of our people try to make out. He sees sense, and not nonsense. But you're a bit of a Medicean, Messer Tito Melema. Ebbene! so I've been myself in my time, before the cask began to run sour. What's your business?'

'Simply to know the price of that fine coat of mail I saw hanging up here the other day. I want to buy it for a certain personage who needs a protection of that sort under his doublet.'

'Let him come and buy it himself, then,' said Niccolo, bluntly. 'I'm rather nice about what I sell, and whom I sell to. I like to know who's my customer.'

'I know your scruples, Niccolo. But that is only defensive armour: it can hurt nobody.'

'True: but it may make the man who wears it feel himself all the safer if he should want to hurt somebody. No, no; it's not my own work; but it's fine work of Maso of Brescia; I should be loth for it to cover the heart of a scoundrel. I must know who is to wear it.'

'Well, then, to be plain with you, Niccolo mio, I want it myself,' said Tito, knowing it was useless to try persuasion. 'The fact is, I am likely

to have a journey to take - and you know what journeying is in these times. You don't suspect me of treason against the Republic?'

'No, I know no harm of you,' said Niccolo, in his blunt way again. 'But have you the money to pay for the coat? For you've passed my shop often enough to know my sign: you've seen the burning account-books. I trust nobody. The price is twenty florins, and that's because it's second-hand. You're not likely to have so much money with you. Let it be till to-morrow.'

'I happen to have the money,' said Tito, who had been winning at play the day before, and had not emptied his purse. 'I'll carry the armour home with me.'

Niccolo reached down the finely wrought coat, which fell together into little more than two handfuls.

'There, then,' he said, when the florins had been told down on his palm. 'Take the coat. It's made to cheat sword, or poniard, or arrow. But, for my part, I would never put such a thing on. It's like carrying fear about with one.'

Niccolo's words had an unpleasant intensity of meaning for Tito. But he smiled and said -

'Ah, Niccolo, we scholars are all cowards. Handling the pen doesn't thicken the arm as your hammer-wielding does. Addio!'

He folded the armour under his mantle, and hastened across the Ponte Rubaconte.