

Chapter 27 - The Young Wife

While Tito was hastening across the bridge with the new-bought armour under his mantle, Romola was pacing up and down the old library, thinking of him and longing for his return.

It was but a few fair faces that had not looked forth from windows that day to see the entrance of the French king and his nobles. One of the few was Romola's. She had been present at no festivities since her father had died - died quite suddenly in his chair, three months before.

'Is not Tito coming to write?' he had said, when the bell had long ago sounded the usual hour in the evening. He had not asked before, from dread of a negative; but Romola had seen by his listening face and restless movements that nothing else was in his mind.

'No, father, he had to go to a supper at the cardinal's: you know he is wanted so much by every one,' she answered, in a tone of gentle excuse.

'Ah I then perhaps he will bring some positive word about the library; the cardinal promised last week,' said Bardo, apparently pacified by this hope.

He was silent a little while; then, suddenly flushing, he said -

'I must go on without him, Romola. Get the pen. He has brought me no new text to comment on; but I must say what I want to say about the New Platonists. I shall die and nothing will have been done. Make haste, my Romola.'

'I am ready, father,' she said, the next minute, holding the pen in her hand.

But there was silence. Romola took no note of this for a little while, accustomed to pauses in dictation; and when at last she looked round inquiringly, there was no change of attitude.

'I am quite ready, father!'

Still Bardo was silent, and his silence was never again broken.

Romola looked back on that hour with some indignation against herself, because even with the first outburst of her sorrow there had mingled the irrepressible thought, 'Perhaps my life with Tito will be more perfect now.'

For the dream of a triple life with an undivided sum of happiness had not been quite fulfilled. The rainbow-tinted shower of sweets, to have been perfectly typical, should have had some invisible seeds of bitterness mingled with them; the crowned Ariadne, under the snowing roses, had felt more and more the presence of unexpected thorns. It was not Tito's fault, Romola had continually assured herself. He was still all gentleness to her, and to her father also. But it was in the nature of things - she saw it clearly now - it was in the nature of things that no one but herself could go on month after month, and year after year, fulfilling patiently all her father's monotonous exacting demands. Even she, whose sympathy with her father had made all the passion and religion of her young years, had not always been patient, had been inwardly very rebellious. It was true that before their marriage, and even for some time after, Tito had seemed more unwearying than herself; but then, of course, the effort had the ease of novelty. We assume a load with confident readiness, and up to a certain point the growing irksomeness of pressure is tolerable: but at last the desire for relief can no longer be resisted. Romola said to herself that she had been very foolish and ignorant in her girlish time: she was wiser now, and would make no unfair demands on the man to whom she had given her best woman's love and worship. The breath of sadness that still cleaved to her lot while she saw her father month after month sink from elation into new disappointment as Tito gave him less and less of his time, and made bland excuses for not continuing his own share of the joint work - that sadness was no fault of Tito's, she said, but rather of their inevitable destiny. If he stayed less and less with her, why, that was because they could hardly ever be alone. His caresses were no less tender: if she pleaded timidly on any one evening that he should stay with her father instead of going to another engagement which was not peremptory, he excused himself with such charming gaiety, he seemed to linger about her with such fond playfulness before he could quit her, that she could only feel a little heartache in the midst of her love, and then go to her father and try to soften his vexation and disappointment. But all the while inwardly her imagination was busy trying to see how Tito could be as good as she had thought he was, and yet find it impossible to sacrifice those pleasures of society which were necessarily more vivid to a bright creature like him than to the common run of men. She herself would have liked more gaiety, more admiration: it was true, she gave it up willingly for her father's sake - she would have given up much more than that for the sake even of a slight wish on Tito's part. It was clear that their natures differed widely; but perhaps it was no more than the inherent difference between man and woman, that made her affections more absorbing. If there were any other difference she tried to persuade herself that the inferiority was on her side. Tito was really kinder than she was, better tempered, less proud and resentful; he had no angry retorts, he met all complaints with perfect sweetness; he only escaped as quietly as he could from things that were unpleasant.

It belongs to every large nature, when it is not under the immediate power of some strong unquestioning emotion, to suspect itself, and doubt the truth of its own impressions, conscious of possibilities beyond its own horizon. And Romola was urged to doubt herself the more by the necessity of interpreting her disappointment in her life with Tito so as to satisfy at once her love and her pride. Disappointment? Yes, there was no other milder word that would tell the truth. Perhaps all women had to suffer the disappointment of ignorant hopes, if she only knew their experience. Still, there had been something peculiar in her lot: her relation to her father had claimed unusual sacrifices from her husband. Tito had once thought that his love would make those sacrifices easy; his love had not been great enough for that. She was not justified in resenting a self-delusion. No! resentment must not rise: all endurance seemed easy to Romola rather than a state of mind in which she would admit to herself that Tito acted unworthily. If she had felt a new heartache in the solitary hours with her father through the last months of his life, it had been by no inexcusable fault of her husband's; and now - it was a hope that would make its presence felt even in the first moments when her father's place was empty - there was no longer any importunate claim to divide her from Tito; their young lives would flow in one current, and their true marriage would begin.

But the sense of something like guilt towards her father in a hope that grew out of his death, gave all the more force to the anxiety with which she dwelt on the means of fulfilling his supreme wish. That piety towards his memory was all the atonement she could make now for a thought that seemed akin to joy at his loss. The laborious simple life, pure from vulgar corrupting ambitions, embittered by the frustration of the dearest hopes, imprisoned at last in total darkness - a long seed time without a harvest - was at an end now, and all that remained of it besides the tablet in Santa Croce and the unfinished commentary on Tito's text, was the collection of manuscripts and antiquities, the fruit of half a century's toil and frugality. The fulfilment of her father's lifelong ambition about this library was a sacramental obligation for Romola.

The precious relic was safe from creditors, for when the deficit towards their payment had been ascertained, Bernardo del Nero, though he was far from being among the wealthiest Florentines, had advanced the necessary sum of about a thousand florins - a large sum in those days - accepting a lien on the collection as a security.

'The State will repay me,' he had said to Romola, making light of the service, which had really cost him some inconvenience. 'If the cardinal finds a building, as he seems to say he will, our Signoria may consent to do the rest. I have no children, I can afford the risk.'

But within the last ten days all hopes in the Medici had come to an end: and the famous Medicean collections in the Via Larga were themselves in danger of dispersion. French agents had already begun to see that such very fine antique gems as Lorenzo had collected belonged by right to the first nation in Europe; and the Florentine State, which had got possession of the Medicean library, was likely to be glad of a customer for it. With a war to recover Pisa hanging over it, and with the certainty of having to pay large subsidies to the French king, the State was likely to prefer money to manuscripts.

To Romola these grave political changes had gathered their chief interest from their bearing on the fulfilment of her father's wish. She had been brought up in learned seclusion from the interests of actual life, and had been accustomed to think of heroic deeds and great principles as something antithetic to the vulgar present, of the Pnyx and the Forum as something more worthy of attention than the councils of living Florentine men. And now the expulsion of the Medici meant little more for her than the extinction of her best hope about her father's library. The times, she knew, were unpleasant for friends of the Medici, like her godfather and Tito: superstitious shopkeepers and the stupid rabble were full of suspicions; but her new keen interest in public events, in the outbreak of war, in the issue of the French king's visit, in the changes that were likely to happen in the State, was kindled solely by the sense of love and duty to her father's memory. All Romola's ardour had been concentrated in her affections. Her share in her father's learned pursuits had been for her little more than a toil which was borne for his sake; and Tito's airy brilliant faculty had no attraction for her that was not merged in the deeper sympathies that belong to young love and trust. Romola had had contact with no mind that could stir the larger possibilities of her nature; they lay folded and crushed like embryonic wings, making no element in her consciousness beyond an occasional vague uneasiness.

But this new personal interest of hers in public affairs had made her care at last to understand precisely what influence Fra Girolamo's preaching was likely to have on the turn of events. Changes in the form of the State were talked of, and all she could learn from Tito, whose secretaryship and serviceable talents carried him into the heart of public business, made her only the more eager to fill out her lonely day by going to hear for herself what it was that was just now leading all Florence by the ears. This morning, for the first time, she had been to hear one of the Advent sermons in the Duomo. When Tito had left her, she had formed a sudden resolution, and after visiting the spot where her father was buried in Santa Croce, had walked on to the Duomo. The memory of that last scene with Dino was still vivid within her whenever she recalled it, but it had receded behind the experience and anxieties of her married life. The new sensibilities and questions which it had half awakened in her were quieted again by that

subjection to her husband's mind which is felt by every wife who loves her husband with passionate devotedness and full reliance. She remembered the effect of Fra Girolamo's voice and presence on her as a ground for expecting that his sermon might move her in spite of his being a narrow-minded monk. But the sermon did no more than slightly deepen her previous impression, that this fanatical preacher of tribulations was after all a man towards whom it might be possible for her to feel personal regard and reverence. The denunciations and exhortations simply arrested her attention. She felt no terror, no pangs of conscience: it was the roll of distant thunder, that seemed grand, but could not shake her. But when she heard Savonarola invoke martyrdom, she sobbed with the rest: she felt herself penetrated with a new sensation - a strange sympathy with something apart from all the definable interests of her life. It was not altogether unlike the thrill which had accompanied certain rare heroic touches in history and poetry; but the resemblance was as that between the memory of music, and the sense of being possessed by actual vibrating harmonies.

But that transient emotion, strong as it was, seemed to lie quite outside the inner chamber and sanctuary of her life. She was not thinking of Fra Girolamo now; she was listening anxiously for the step of her husband. During these three months of their double solitude she had thought of each day as an epoch in which their union might begin to be more perfect. She was conscious of being sometimes a little too sad or too urgent about what concerned her father's memory - a little too critical or coldly silent when Tito narrated the things that were said and done in the world he frequented - a little too hasty in suggesting that by living quite simply as her father had done, they might become rich enough to pay Bernardo del Nero, and reduce the difficulties about the library. It was not possible that Tito could feel so strongly on this last point as she did, and it was asking a great deal from him to give up luxuries for which he really laboured. The next time Tito came home she would be careful to suppress all those promptings that seemed to isolate her from him. Romola was labouring, as a loving woman must, to subdue her nature to her husband's. The great need of her heart compelled her to strangle, with desperate resolution, every rising impulse of suspicion, pride, and resentment; she felt equal to any self-infliction that would save her from ceasing to love. That would have been like the hideous nightmare in which the world had seemed to break away all round her, and leave her feet overhanging the darkness. Romola had never distinctly imagined such a future for herself; she was only beginning to feel the presence of effort in that clinging trust which had once been mere repose.

She waited and listened long, for Tito had not come straight home after leaving Niccolo Caparra, and it was more than two hours after

the time when he was crossing the Ponte Rubaconte that Romola heard the great door of the court turning on its hinges, and hastened to the head of the stone steps. There was a lamp hanging over the stairs, and they could see each other distinctly as he ascended. The eighteen months had produced a more definable change in Romola's face than in Tito's; the expression was more subdued, less cold, and more beseeching, and, as the pink flush overspread her face now, in her joy that the long waiting was at an end, she was much lovelier than on the day when Tito had first seen her. On that day, any on-looker would have said that Romola's nature was made to command, and Tito's to bend; yet now Romola's mouth was quivering a little, and there was some timidity in her glance.

He made an effort to smile, as she said -

'My Tito, you are tired; it has been a fatiguing day: is it not true?'

Maso was there, and no more was said until they had crossed the ante-chamber and closed the door of the library behind them. The wood was burning brightly on the great dogs; that was one welcome for Tito, late as he was, and Romola's gentle voice was another.

He just turned and kissed her when she took off his mantle; then he went towards a high-backed chair placed for him near the fire, threw himself into it, and flung away his cap, saying, not peevishly, but in a fatigued tone of remonstrance, as he gave a slight shudder -

'Romola, I wish you would give up sitting in this library. Surely our own rooms are pleasanter in this chill weather.'

Romola felt hurt. She had never seen Tito so indifferent in his manner; he was usually full of lively solicitous attention. And she had thought so much of his return to her after the long day's absence! He must be very weary.

'I wonder you have forgotten, Tito,' she answered, looking at him anxiously, as if she wanted to read an excuse for him in the signs of bodily fatigue. 'You know I am making the catalogue on the new plan that my father wished for; you have not time to help me, so I must work at it closely.'

Tito, instead of meeting Romola's glance, closed his eyes and rubbed his hands over his face and hair. He felt he was behaving unlike himself, but he would make amends tomorrow. The terrible resurrection of secret fears, which, if Romola had known them, would have alienated her from him for ever, caused him to feel an alienation already begun between them - caused him to feel a certain repulsion towards a woman from whose mind he was in danger. The feeling had

taken hold of him unawares, and he was vexed with himself for behaving in this new cold way to her. He could not suddenly command any affectionate looks or words; he could only exert himself to say what might serve as an excuse.

'I am not well, Romola; you must not be surprised if I am peevish.'

'Ah, you have had so much to tire you to-day,' said Romola, kneeling down close to him, and laying her arm on his chest while she put his hair back caressingly.

Suddenly she drew her arm away with a start, and a gaze of alarmed inquiry.

'What have you got under your tunic, Tito? Something as hard as iron.'

'It is iron - it is chain-armour,' he said at once. He was prepared for the surprise and the question, and he spoke quietly, as of something that he was not hurried to explain.

'There was some unexpected danger to-day, then?' said Romola, in a tone of conjecture. 'You had it lent to you for the procession?'

'No; it is my own. I shall be obliged to wear it constantly, for some time.'

'What is it that threatens you, my Tito?' said Romola, looking terrified, and clinging to him again.

'Every one is threatened in these times, who is not a rabid enemy of the Medici. Don't look distressed, my Romola - this armour will make me safe against covert attacks.'

Tito put his hand on her neck and smiled. This little dialogue about the armour had broken through the new crust, and made a channel for the sweet habit of kindness.

'But my godfather, then,' said Romola; 'is not he, too, in danger? And he takes no precautions - ought he not? since he must surely be in more danger than you, who have so little influence compared with him.'

'It is just because I am less important that I am in more danger,' said Tito, readily. 'I am suspected constantly of being an envoy. And men like Messer Bernardo are protected by their position and their extensive family connections, which spread among all parties, while I am a Greek that nobody would avenge.'

'But, Tito, is it a fear of some particular person, or only a vague sense of danger, that has made you think of wearing this?' Romola was unable to repel the idea of a degrading fear in Tito, which mingled itself with her anxiety.

'I have had special threats,' said Tito, 'but I must beg you to be silent on the subject, my Romola. I shall consider that you have broken my confidence, if you mention it to your godfather.'

'Assuredly I will not mention it,' said Romola, blushing, 'if you wish it to be a secret. But, dearest Tito,' she added, after a moment's pause, in a tone of loving anxiety, 'it will make you very wretched.'

'What will make me wretched?' he said, with a scarcely perceptible movement across his face, as from some darting sensation.

'This fear - this heavy armour. I can't help shuddering as I feel it under my arm. I could fancy it a story of enchantment - that some malignant fiend had changed your sensitive human skin into a hard shell. It seems so unlike my bright, light-hearted Tito!'

'Then you would rather have your husband exposed to danger, when he leaves you?' said Tito, smiling. 'If you don't mind my being poniarded or shot, why need I mind? I will give up the armour - shall I?'

'No, Tito, no. I am fanciful. Do not heed what I have said. But such crimes are surely not common in Florence? I have always heard my father and godfather say so. Have they become frequent lately?'

'It is not unlikely they will become frequent, with the bitter hatreds that are being bred continually.'

Romola was silent a few moments. She shrank from insisting further on the subject of the armour. She tried to shake it off.

'Tell me what has happened to-day,' she said, in a cheerful tone. 'Has all gone off well?'

'Excellently well. First of all, the rain came and put an end to Luca Corsini's oration, which nobody wanted to hear, and a ready-tongued personage - some say it was Gaddi, some say it was Melema, but really it was done so quickly no one knows who it was - had the honour of giving the Cristianissimo the briefest possible welcome in bad French.'

'Tito, it was you, I know,' said Romola, smiling brightly, and kissing him. 'How is it you never care about claiming anything? And after that?'

'Oh! after that, there was a show of armour and jewels, and trappings, such as you saw at the last Florentine giostra, only a great deal more of them. There was strutting, and prancing, and confusion, and scrambling, and the people shouted, and the Cristianissimo smiled from ear to ear. And after that there was a great deal of flattery, and eating, and play. I was at Tornabuoni's. I will tell you about it tomorrow.'

'Yes, dearest, never mind now. But is there any more hope that things will end peaceably for Florence, that the Republic will not get into fresh troubles?'

Tito gave a shrug. 'Florence will have no peace but what it pays well for; that is clear.'

Romola's face saddened, but she checked herself, and said, cheerfully, 'You would not guess where I went to-day, Tito. I went to the Duomo, to hear Fra Girolamo.'

Tito looked startled; he had immediately thought of Baldassarre's entrance into the Duomo; but Romola gave his look another meaning.

'You are surprised, are you not? It was a sudden thought. I want to know all about the public affairs now, and I determined to hear for myself what the Frate promised the people about this French invasion.'

'Well, and what did you think of the prophet?'

'He certainly has a very mysterious power, that man. A great deal of his sermon was what I expected; but once I was strangely moved - I sobbed with the rest.'

'Take care, Romola,' said Tito, playfully, feeling relieved that she had said nothing about Baldassarre; 'you have a touch of fanaticism in you. I shall have you seeing visions, like your brother.'

'No; it was the same with every one else. He carried them all with him; unless it were that gross Dolfo Spini, whom I saw there making grimaces. There was even a wretched-looking man, with a rope round his neck - an escaped prisoner, I should think, who had run in for shelter - a very wild-eyed old man: I saw him with great tears rolling down his cheeks, as he looked and listened quite eagerly.'

There was a slight pause before Tito spoke.

'I saw the man,' he said, - 'the prisoner. I was outside the Duomo with Lorenzo Tornabuoni when he ran in. He had escaped from a French soldier. Did you see him when you came out?'

'No, he went out with our good old Piero di Cosimo. I saw Piero come in and cut off his rope, and take him out of the church. But you want rest, Tito? You feel ill?'

'Yes,' said Tito, rising. The horrible sense that he must live in continual dread of what Baldassarre had said or done pressed upon him like a cold weight.