Chapter 28 - The Painted Record

Four days later, Romola was on her way to the house of Piero di Cosimo, in the Via Gualfonda. Some of the streets through which she had to pass were lined with Frenchmen who were gazing at Florence, and with Florentines who were gazing at the French, and the gaze was not on either side entirely friendly and admiring. The first nation in Europe, of necessity finding itself, when out of its own country, in the presence of general inferiority, naturally assumed an air of conscious pre-eminence; and the Florentines, who had taken such pains to play the host amiably, were getting into the worst humour with their too superior guests.

For after the first smiling compliments and festivities were over - after wondrous Mysteries with unrivalled machinery of floating clouds and angels had been presented in churches - after the royal guest had honoured Florentine dames with much of his Most Christian ogling at balls and suppers, and business had begun to be talked of - it appeared that the new Charlemagne regarded Florence as a conquered city, inasmuch as he had entered it with his lance in rest, talked of leaving his viceroy behind him, and had thoughts of bringing back the Medici. Singular logic this appeared to be on the part of an elect instrument of God! since the policy of Piero de' Medici, disowned by the people, had been the only offence of Florence against the majesty of France. And Florence was determined not to submit. The determination was being expressed very strongly in consultations of citizens inside the Old Palace, and it was beginning to show itself on the broad flags of the streets and piazza wherever there was an opportunity of flouting an insolent Frenchman. Under these circumstances the streets were not altogether a pleasant promenade for well-born women; but Romola, shrouded in her black veil and mantle, and with old Maso by her side, felt secure enough from impertinent observation.

And she was impatient to visit Piero di Cosimo. A copy of her father's portrait as Oedipus, which he had long ago undertaken to make for her, was not yet finished; and Piero was so uncertain in his work - sometimes, when the demand was not peremptory, laying aside a picture for months; sometimes thrusting it into a corner or coffer, where it was likely to be utterly forgotten - that she felt it necessary to watch over his progress. She was a favourite with the painter, and he was inclined to fulfil any wish of hers, but no general inclination could be trusted as a safeguard against his sudden whims. He had told her the week before that the picture would perhaps be finished by this time; and Romola was nervously anxious to have in her possession a copy of the only portrait existing of her father in the days of his blindness, lest his image shouId grow dim in her mind. The sense of defect in her devotedness to him made her cling with all the force of

compunction as well as affection to the duties of memory. Love does not aim simply at the conscious good of the beloved object: it is not satisfied without perfect loyalty of heart; it aims at its own completeness.

Romola, by special favour, was allowed to intrude upon the painter without previous notice. She lifted the iron slide and called Piero in a flute-like tone, as the little maiden with the eggs had done in Tito's presence. Piero was quick in answering, but when he opened the door he accounted for his quickness in a manner that was not complimentary.

'Ah, Madonna Romola, is it you? I thought my eggs were come; I wanted them.'

'I have brought you something better than hard eggs, Piero. Maso has got a little basket full of cakes and confetti for you,' said Romola, smiling, as she put back her veil. She took the basket from Maso, and stepping into the house, said, -

'I know you like these things when you can have them without trouble. Confess you do.'

'Yes, when they come to me as easily as the light does,' said Piero, folding his arms and looking down at the sweetmeats as Romola uncovered them and glanced at him archly. 'And they are come along with the light now,' he added, lifting his eyes to her face and hair with a painter's admiration, as her hood, dragged by the weight of her veil, fell backward.

'But I know what the sweetmeats are for,' he went on; 'they are to stop my mouth while you scold me. Well, go on into the next room, and you will see I've done something to the picture since you saw it, though it's not finished yet. But I didn't promise, you know: I take care not to promise:

'Chi promette e non mantiene
L'anima sua non va mai bene.'

The door opening on the wild garden was closed now, and the painter was at work. Not at Romola's picture, however That was standing on the floor, propped against the wall and Piero stooped to lift it, that he might carry it into the proper light. But in lifting away this picture, he had disclosed another - the oil-sketch of Tito, to which he had made an important addition within the last few days. It was so much smaller than the other picture, that it stood far within it, and Piero, apt to forget where he had placed anything, was not aware of what he had revealed as, peering at some detail in the painting which he held

in his hands, he went to place it on an easel. But Romola exclaimed, fiushing with astonishment -

'That is Tito!'

Piero looked round, and gave a silent shrug. He was vexed at his own forgetfulness.

She was still looking at the sketch in astonishment; but presently she turned towards the painter, and said with puzzled alarm -

'What a strange picture! When did you paint it? What does it mean?'

'A mere fancy of mine,' said Piero, lifting off his skull-cap, scratching his head, and making the usual grimace by which he avoided the betrayal of any feeling. 'I wanted a handsome young face for it, and your husband's was just the thing.'

He went forward, stooped down to the picture, and lifting it away with its back to Romola, pretended to be giving it a passing examination, before putting it aside as a thing not good enough to show.

But Romola, who had the fact of the armour in her mind, and was penetrated by this strange coincidence of things which associated Tito with the idea of fear, went to his elbow and said -

'Don't put it away; let me look again. That man with the rope round his neck - I saw him - I saw you come to him in the Duomo. What was it that made you put him into a picture with Tito?'

Piero saw no better resource than to tell part of the truth.

'It was a mere accident. The man was running away - running up the steps, and caught hold of your husband: I suppose he had stumbled. I happened to be there, and saw it, and I thought the savage-looking old fellow was a good subject. But it's worth nothing - it's only a freakish daub of mine.' Piero ended contemptuously, moving the sketch away with an air of decision, and putting it on a high shelf. 'Come and look at the Oedipus.'

He had shown a little too much anxiety in putting the sketch out of her sight, and had produced the very impression he had sought to prevent - that there was really something unpleasant, something disadvantageous to Tito, in the circumstances out of which the picture arose. But this impression silenced her: her pride and delicacy shrank from questioning further, where questions might seem to imply that she could entertain even a slight suspicion against her husband. She merely said, in as quiet a tone as she could -

'He was a strange piteous-looking man, that prisoner. Do you know anything more of him?'

'No more: I showed him the way to the hospital, that's all. See, now, the face of Oedipus is pretty nearly finished; tell me what you think of it.'

Romola now gave her whole attention to her father's portrait, standing in long silence before it.

'Ah,' she said at last, 'you have done what I wanted. You have given it more of the listening look. My good Piero' - she turned towards him with bright moist eyes - 'I am very grateful to you.'

'Now that's what I can't bear in you women,' said Piero, turning impatiently, and kicking aside the objects that littered the floor - 'you are always pouring out feelings where there's no call for them. Why should you be grateful to me for a picture you pay me for, especially when I make you wait for it? And if I paint a picture, I suppose it's for my own pleasure and credit to paint it well, eh? Are you to thank a man for not being a rogue or a noodle? It's enough if he himself thanks Messer Domeneddio, who has made him neither the one nor the other. But women think walls are held together with honey.'

'You crusty Piero! I forgot how snappish you are. Here, put this nice sweetmeat in your mouth,' said Romola, smiling through her tears, and taking something very crisp and sweet from the little basket.

Piero accepted it very much as that proverbial bear that dreams of pears might accept an exceedingly mellow 'swan-egg' - really liking the gift, but accustomed to have his pleasures and pains concealed under a shaggy coat.

'It's good, Madonna Antigone,' said Piero, putting his fingers in the basket for another. He had eaten nothing but hard eggs for a fortnight. Romola stood opposite him, feeling her new anxiety suspended for a little while by the sight of this naive enjoyment.

'Good-bye, Piero,' she said, presently, setting down the basket. 'I promise not to thank you if you finish the portrait soon and well. I will tell you, you were bound to do it for your own credit.'

'Good,' said Piero, curtly, helping her with much deftness to fold her mantle and veil round her.

'I'm glad she asked no more questions about that sketch,' he thought, when he had closed the door behind her. 'I should be sorry for her to

guess that I thought her fine husband a good model for a coward. But I made light of it; she'll not think of it again.'

Piero was too sanguine, as open-hearted men are apt to be when they attempt a little clever simulation. The thought of the picture pressed more and more on Romola as she walked homeward. She could not help putting together the two facts of the chain-armour and the encounter mentioned by Piero between her husband and the prisoner, which had happened on the morning of the day when the armour was adopted. That look of terror which the painter had given Tito, had he seen it? What could it all mean?

'It means nothing,' she tried to assure herself. 'It was a mere coincidence. Shall I ask Tito about it?' Her mind said at last, 'No: I will not question him about anything he did not tell me spontaneously. It is an offence against the trust I owe him.' Her heart said, 'I dare not ask him.'

There was a terrible flaw in the trust: she was afraid of any hasty movement, as men are who hold something precious and want to believe that it is not broken.