

Chapter 32 - A Revelation

The next day Romola, like every other Florentine, was excited about the departure of the French. Besides her other reasons for gladness, she had a dim hope, which she was conscious was half superstitious, that those new anxieties about Tito, having come with the burdensome guests, might perhaps vanish with them. The French had been in Florence hardly eleven days, but in that space she had felt more acute unhappiness than she had known in her life before. Tito had adopted the hateful armour on the day of their arrival, and though she could frame no distinct notion why their departure should remove the cause of his fear - though, when she thought of that cause, the image of the prisoner grasping him, as she had seen it in Piero's sketch, urged itself before her and excluded every other - still, when the French were gone, she would be rid of something that was strongly associated with her pain.

Wrapped in her mantle she waited under the loggia at the top of the house, and watched for the glimpses of the troops and the royal retinue passing the bridges on their way to the Porta San Piero, that looks towards Siena and Rome. She even returned to her station when the gates had been closed, that she might feel herself vibrating with the great peal of the bells. It was dusk then, and when at last she descended into the library, she lit her lamp with the resolution that she would overcome the agitation which had made her idle all day, and sit down to work at her copying of the catalogue. Tito had left home early in the morning, and she did not expect him yet. Before he came she intended to leave the library, and sit in the pretty saloon, with the dancing nymphs and the birds. She had done so every evening since he had objected to the library as chill and gloomy.

To her great surprise, she had not been at work long before Tito entered. Her first thought was, how cheerless he would feel in the wide darkness of this great room, with one little oil-lamp burning at the further end, and the fire nearly out. She almost ran towards him.

'Tito, dearest, I did not know you would come so soon,' she said, nervously, putting up her white arms to unwind his becchetto.

'I am not welcome then?' he said, with one of his brightest smiles, clasping her, but playfully holding his head back from her.

'Tito!' She uttered the word in a tone of pretty, loving reproach, and then he kissed her fondly, stroked her hair, as his manner was, and seemed not to mind about taking off his mantle yet. Romola quivered with delight. All the emotions of the day had been preparing in her a keener sensitiveness to the return of this habitual manner. 'It will

come back,' she was saying to herself, 'the old happiness will perhaps come back. He is like himself again.'

Tito was taking great pains to be like himself; his heart was palpitating with anxiety.

'If I had expected you so soon,' said Romola, as she at last helped him to take off his wrappings, 'I would have had a little festival prepared to this joyful ringing of the bells. I did not mean to be here in the library when you came home.'

'Never mind, sweet,' he said, carelessly. 'Do not think about the fire. Come - come and sit down.'

There was a low stool against Tito's chair, and that was Romola's habitual seat when they were talking together. She rested her arm on his knee, as she used to do on her father's, and looked up at him while he spoke. He had never yet noticed the presence of the portrait, and she had not mentioned it - thinking of it all the more.

'I have been enjoying the clang of the bells for the first time, Tito,' she began. 'I liked being shaken and deafened by them: I fancied I was something like a Bacchante possessed by a divine rage. Are not the people looking very joyful to-night?'

'Joyful after a sour and pious fashion,' said Tito, with a shrug. 'But, in truth, those who are left behind in Florence have little cause to be joyful: it seems to me, the most reasonable ground of gladness would be to have got out of Florence.'

Tito had sounded the desired key-note without any trouble, or appearance of premeditation. He spoke with no emphasis, but he looked grave enough to make Romola ask rather anxiously -

'Why, Tito? Are there fresh troubles?'

'No need of fresh ones, my Romola. There are three strong parties in the city, all ready to fly at each other's throats. And if the Frate's party is strong enough to frighten the other two into silence, as seems most likely, life will be as pleasant and amusing as a funeral. They have the plan of a Great Council simmering already; and if they get it, the man who sings sacred Lauds the loudest will be the most eligible for office. And besides that, the city will be so drained by the payment of this great subsidy to the French king, and by the war to get back Pisa, that the prospect would be dismal enough without the rule of fanatics. On the whole, Florence will be a delightful place for those worthies who entertain themselves in the evening by going into crypts and lashing themselves; but for everything else, the exiles have the best of it. For

my own part, I have been thinking seriously that we should be wise to quit Florence, my Romola.'

She started. 'Tito, how could we leave Florence? Surely you do not think I could leave it - at least, not yet - not for a long while.' She had turned cold and trembling, and did not find it quite easy to speak. Tito must know the reasons she had in her mind.

'That is all a fabric of your own imagination, my sweet one. Your secluded life has made you lay such false stress on a few things. You know I used to tell you, before we were married, that I wished we were somewhere else than in Florence. If you had seen more places and more people, you would know what I mean when I say that there is something in the Florentines that reminds me of their cutting spring winds. I like people who take life less eagerly; and it would be good for my Romola, too, to see a new life. I should like to dip her a little in the soft waters of forgetfulness.'

He leaned forward and kissed her brow, and laid his hand on her fair hair again; but she felt his caress no more than if he had kissed a mask. She was too much agitated by the sense of the distance between their minds to be conscious that his lips touched her.

'Tito, it is not because I suppose Florence is the pleasantest place in the world that I desire not to quit it. It is because I - because we have to see my father's wish fulfilled. My godfather is old; he is seventy-one; we could not leave it to him.'

'It is precisely those superstitions which hang about your mind like bedimming clouds, my Romola, that make one great reason why I could wish we were two hundred leagues from Florence. I am obliged to take care of you in opposition to your own will: if those dear eyes, that look so tender, see falsely, I must see for them, and save my wife from wasting her life in disappointing herself by impracticable dreams.'

Romola sat silent and motionless: she could not blind herself to the direction in which Tito's words pointed: he wanted to persuade her that they might get the library deposited in some monastery, or take some other ready means to rid themselves of a task, and of a tie to Florence; and she was determined never to submit her mind to his judgment on this question of duty to her father; she was inwardly prepared to encounter any sort of pain in resistance. But the determination was kept latent in these first moments by the heart-crushing sense that now at last she and Tito must be confessedly divided in their wishes. He was glad of her silence; for, much as he had feared the strength of her feeling, it was impossible for him, shut up in the narrowness that hedges in all merely clever, unimpassioned

men, not to overestimate the persuasiveness of his own arguments. His conduct did not look ugly to himself, and his imagination did not suffice to show him exactly how it would look to Romola. He went on in the same gentle, remonstrating tone.

'You know, dearest - your own clear judgment always showed you - that the notion of isolating a collection of books and antiquities, and attaching a single name to them for ever, was one that had no valid, substantial good for its object: and yet more, one that was liable to be defeated in a thousand ways. See what has become of the Medici collections! And, for my part, I consider it even blameworthy to entertain those petty views of appropriation: why should any one be reasonably glad that Florence should possess the benefits of learned research and taste more than any other city? I understand your feeling about the wishes of the dead; but wisdom puts a limit to these sentiments, else lives might be continually wasted in that sort of futile devotion - like praising deaf gods for ever. You gave your life to your father while he lived; why should you demand more of yourself?'

'Because it was a trust,' said Romola, in a low but distinct voice. 'He trusted me, he trusted you, Tito. I did not expect you to feel anything else about it - to feel as I do - but I did expect you to feel that.'

'Yes, dearest, of course I should feel it on a point where your father's real welfare or happiness was concerned; but there is no question of that now. If we believed in purgatory, I should be as anxious as you to have masses said; and if I believed it could now pain your father to see his library preserved and used in a rather different way from what he had set his mind on, I should share the strictness of your views. But a little philosophy should teach us to rid ourselves of those air-woven fetters that mortals hang round themselves, spending their lives in misery under the mere imagination of weight. Your mind, which seizes ideas so readily, my Romola, is able to discriminate between substantial good and these brain-wrought fantasies. Ask yourself, dearest, what possible good can these books and antiquities do, stowed together under your father's name in Florence, more than they would do if they were divided or carried elsewhere? Nay, is not the very dispersion of such things in hands that know how to value them, one means of extending their usefulness? This rivalry of Italian cities is very petty and illiberal. The loss of Constantinople was the gain of the whole civilised world.'

Romola was still too thoroughly under the painful pressure of the new revelation Tito was making of himself, for her resistance to find any strong vent. As that fluent talk fell on her ears there was a rising contempt within her, which only made her more conscious of her bruised, despairing love, her love for the Tito she had married and believed in. Her nature, possessed with the energies of strong emotion,

recoiled from this hopelessly shallow readiness which professed to appropriate the widest sympathies and had no pulse for the nearest. She still spoke like one who was restrained from showing all she felt. She had only drawn away her arm from his knee, and sat with her hands clasped before her, cold and motionless as locked waters.

'You talk of substantial good, Tito! Are faithfulness, and love, and sweet grateful memories, no good? Is it no good that we should keep our silent promises on which others build because they believe in our love and truth? Is it no good that a just life should be justly honoured? Or, is it good that we should harden our hearts against all the wants and hopes of those who have depended on us? What good can belong to men who have such souls? To talk cleverly, perhaps, and find soft couches for themselves, and live and die with their base selves as their best companions.'

Her voice had gradually risen till there was a ring of scorn in the last words; she made a slight pause, but he saw there were other words quivering on her lips, and he chose to let them come.

'I know of no good for cities or the world if they are to be made up of such beings. But I am not thinking of other Italian cities and the whole civilised world - I am thinking of my father, and of my love and sorrow for him, and of his just claims on us. I would give up anything else, Tito, - I would leave Florence, - what else did I live for but for him and you? But I will not give up that duty. What have I to do with your arguments? It was a yearning of his heart, and therefore it is a yearning of mine.'

Her voice, from having been tremulous, had become full and firm. She felt that she had been urged on to say all that it was needful for her to say. She thought, poor thing, there was nothing harder to come than this struggle against Tito's suggestions as against the meaner part of herself.

He had begun to see clearly that he could not persuade her into assent: he must take another course, and show her that the time for resistance was past. That, at least, would put an end to further struggle; and if the disclosure were not made by himself to-night, to-morrow it must be made in another way. This necessity nerved his courage; and his experience of her affectionateness and unexpected submissiveness, ever since their marriage until now, encouraged him to hope that, at last, she would accommodate herself to what had been his will.

'I am sorry to hear you speak in that spirit of blind persistence, my Romola,' he said, quietly, 'because it obliges me to give you pain. But I partly foresaw your opposition, and as a prompt decision was

necessary, I avoided that obstacle, and decided without consulting you. The very care of a husband for his wife's interest compels him to that separate action sometimes - even when he has such a wife as you, my Romola.'

She turned her eyes on him in breathless inquiry.

'I mean,' he said, answering her look, 'that I have arranged for the transfer, both of the books and of the antiquities, where they will find the highest use and value. The books have been bought for the Duke of Milan, the marbles and bronzes and the rest are going to France: and both will be protected by the stability of a great Power, instead of remaining in a city which is exposed to ruin.'

Before he had finished speaking, Romola had started from her seat, and stood up looking down at him, with tightened hands falling before her, and, for the first time in her life, with a flash of fierceness in her scorn and anger.

'You have sold them?' she asked, as if she distrusted her ears.

'I have,' said Tito, quailing a little. The scene was unpleasant - the descending scorn already scorched him.

'You are a treacherous man!' she said, with something grating in her voice, as she looked down at him.

She was silent for a minute, and he sat still, feeling that ingenuity was powerless just now. Suddenly she turned away, and said in an agitated tone, 'It may be hindered - I am going to my godfather.'

In an instant Tito started up, went to the door, locked it, and took out the key. It was time for all the masculine predominance that was latent in him to show itself. But he was not angry; he only felt that the moment was eminently unpleasant, and that when this scene was at an end he should be glad to keep away from Romola for a little while. But it was absolutely necessary first that she should be reduced to passiveness.

'Try to calm yourself a little, Romola,' he said, leaning in the easiest attitude possible against a pedestal under the bust of a grim old Roman. Not that he was inwardly easy: his heart palpitated with a moral dread, against which no chain-armour could be found. He had locked-in his wife's anger and scorn, but he had been obliged to lock himself in with it; and his blood did not rise with contest - his olive cheek was perceptibly paled.

Romola had paused and turned her eyes on him as she saw him take his stand and lodge the key in his scarsella. Her eyes were flashing, and her whole frame seemed to be possessed by impetuous force that wanted to leap out in some deed. All the crushing pain of disappointment in her husband, which had made the strongest part of her consciousness a few minutes before, was annihilated by the vehemence of her indignation. She could not care in this moment that the man she was despising as he leaned there in his loathsome beauty - she could not care that he was her husband; she could only feel that she despised him. The pride and fierceness of the old Bardi blood had been thoroughly awaked in her for the first time.

'Try at least to understand the fact,' said Tito, 'and do not seek to take futile steps which may be fatal. It is of no use for you to go to your godfather. Messer Bernardo cannot reverse what I have done. Only sit down. You would hardly wish, if you were quite yourself, to make known to any third person what passes between us in private.'

Tito knew that he had touched the right fibre there. But she did not sit down; she was too unconscious of her body voluntarily to change her attitude.

'Why can it not be reversed?' she said, after a pause. 'Nothing is moved yet.'

'Simply because the sale has been concluded by written agreement; the purchasers have left Florence, and I hold the bonds for the purchase-money.'

'If my father had suspected you of being a faithless man,' said Romola, in a tone of bitter scorn, which insisted on darting out before she could say anything else, 'he would have placed the library safely out of your power. But death overtook him too soon, and when you were sure his ear was deaf, and his hand stiff, you robbed him.' She paused an instant, and then said, with gathered passion, 'Have you robbed somebody else, who is not dead? Is that the reason you wear armour?'

Romola had been driven to utter the words as men are driven to use the lash of the horsewhip. At first, Tito felt horribly cowed; it seemed to him that the disgrace he had been dreading would be worse than he had imagined it. But soon there was a reaction: such power of dislike and resistance as there was within him was beginning to rise against a wife whose voice seemed like the herald of a retributive fate. Her, at least, his quick mind told him that he might master.

'It is useless,' he said, coolly, 'to answer the words of madness, Romola. Your peculiar feeling about your father has made you mad at this moment. Any rational person looking at the case from a due

distance will see that I have taken the wisest course. Apart from the influence of your exaggerated feelings on him, I am convinced that Messer Bernardo would be of that opinion.'

'He would not!' said Romola. 'He lives in the hope of seeing my father's wish exactly fulfilled. We spoke of it together only yesterday. He will help me yet. Who are these men to whom you have sold my father's property?'

'There is no reason why you should not be told, except that it signifies little. The Count di San Severino and the Seneschal de Beaucaire are now on their way with the king to Siena.'

'They may be overtaken and persuaded to give up their purchase,' said Romola, eagerly, her anger beginning to be surmounted by anxious thought.

'No, they may not,' said Tito, with cool decision.

'Why?'

'Because I do not choose that they should.'

'But if you were paid the money? - we will pay you the money,' said Romola.

No words could have disclosed more fully her sense of alienation from Tito; but they were spoken with less of bitterness than of anxious pleading. And he felt stronger, for he saw that the first impulse of fury was past.

'No, my Romola. Understand that such thoughts as these are impracticable. You would not, in a reasonable moment, ask your godfather to bury three thousand florins in addition to what he has already paid on the library. I think your pride and delicacy would shrink from that.'

She began to tremble and turn cold again with discouragement, and sank down on the carved chest near which she was standing. He went on in a clear voice, under which she shuddered, as if it had been a narrow cold stream coursing over a hot cheek.

'Moreover, it is not my will that Messer Bernardo should advance the money, even if the project were not an utterly wild one. And I beg you to consider, before you take any step or utter any word on the subject, what will be the consequences of your placing yourself in opposition to me, and trying to exhibit your husband in the odious light which your own distempered feelings cast over him. What object will you serve by

injuring me with Messer Bernardo? The event is irrevocable, the library is sold, and you are my wife.'

Every word was spoken for the sake of a calculated effect, for his intellect was urged into the utmost activity by the danger of the crisis. He knew that Romola's mind would take in rapidly enough all the wide meaning of his speech. He waited and watched her in silence.

She had turned her eyes from him, and was looking on the ground, and in that way she sat for several minutes. When she spoke, her voice was quite altered, - it was quiet and cold.

'I have one thing to ask.'

'Ask anything that I can do without injuring us both, Romola.'

'That you will give me that portion of the money which belongs to my godfather, and let me pay him.'

'I must have some assurance from you, first, of the attitude you intend to take towards me.'

'Do you believe in assurances, Tito?' she said, with a tinge of returning bitterness.

'From you, I do.'

'I will do you no harm. I shall disclose nothing. I will say nothing to pain him or you. You say truly, the event is irrevocable.'

'Then I will do what you desire to-morrow morning.'

'To-night, if possible,' said Romola, 'that we may not speak of it again.'

'It is possible,' he said, moving towards the lamp, while she sat still, looking away from him with absent eyes.

Presently he came and bent down over her, to put a piece of paper into her hand. 'You will receive something in return, you are aware, my Romola?' he said, gently, not minding so much what had passed, now he was secure; and feeling able to try and propitiate her.

'Yes,' she said, taking the paper, without looking at him, 'I understand.'

'And you will forgive me, my Romola, when you have had time to reflect.' He just touched her brow with his lips, but she took no notice, and seemed really unconscious of the act.

She was aware that he unlocked the door and went out. She moved her head and listened. The great door of the court opened and shut again. She started up as if some sudden freedom had come, and going to her father's chair where his picture was propped, fell on her knees before it, and burst into sobs.