

Chapter 34 - No Place for Repentance

Messer Naldo came again sooner than was expected: he came on the evening of the twenty-eighth of November, only eleven days after his previous visit, proving that he had not gone far beyond the mountains; and a scene which we have witnessed as it took place that evening in the Via de' Bardi may help to explain the impulse which turned his steps towards the hill of San Giorgio.

When Tito had first found this home for Tessa, on his return from Rome, more than a year and a half ago, he had acted, he persuaded himself, simply under the constraint imposed on him by his own kindness after the unlucky incident which had made foolish little Tessa imagine him to be her husband. It was true that the kindness was manifested towards a pretty trusting thing whom it was impossible to be near without feeling inclined to caress and pet her; but it was not less true that Tito had movements of kindness towards her apart from any contemplated gain to himself. Otherwise, charming as her prettiness and prattle were in a lazy moment, he might have preferred to be free from her; for he was not in love with Tessa - he was in love for the first time in his life with an entirely different woman, whom he was not simply inclined to shower caresses on, but whose presence possessed him so that the simple sweep of her long tresses across his cheek seemed to vibrate through the hours. All the young ideal passion he had in him had been stirred by Romola, and his fibre was too fine, his intellect too bright, for him to be tempted into the habits of a gross pleasure-seeker. But he had spun a web about himself and Tessa, which he felt incapable of breaking: in the first moments after the mimic marriage he had been prompted to leave her under an illusion by a distinct calculation of his own possible need, but since that critical moment it seemed to him that the web had gone on spinning itself in spite of him, like a growth over which he had no power. The elements of kindness and self-indulgence are hard to distinguish in a soft nature like Tito's; and the annoyance he had felt under Tessa's pursuit of him on the day of his betrothal, the thorough intention of revealing the truth to her with which he set out to fulfil his promise of seeing her again, were a sufficiently strong argument to him that in ultimately leaving Tessa under her illusion and providing a home for her, he had been overcome by his own kindness. And in these days of his first devotion to Romola he needed a self-justifying argument. He had learned to be glad that she was deceived about some things. But every strong feeling makes to itself a conscience of its own - has its own piety; just as much as the feeling of the son towards the mother, which will sometimes survive amid the worst fumes of depravation; and Tito could not yet be easy in committing a secret offence against his wedded love.

But he was all the more careful in taking precautions to preserve the secrecy of the offence. Monna Lisa, who, like many of her class, never left her habitation except to go to one or two particular shops, and to confession once a-year, knew nothing of his real name and whereabouts: she only knew that he paid her so as to make her very comfortable, and minded little about the rest, save that she got fond of Tessa, and found pleasure in the cares for which she was paid. There was some mystery behind, clearly, since Tessa was a contadina, and Messer Naldo was a signor; but, for aught Monna Lisa knew, he might be a real husband. For Tito had thoroughly frightened Tessa into silence about the circumstances of their marriage, by telling her that if she broke that silence she would never see him again; and Monna Lisa's deafness, which made it impossible to say anything to her without some premeditation, had saved Tessa from any incautious revelation to her, such as had run off her tongue in talking with Baldassarre. For a long while Tito's visits were so rare, that it seemed likely enough he took journeys between them. They were prompted chiefly by the desire to see that all things were going on well with Tessa; and though he always found his visit pleasanter than the prospect of it - always felt anew the charm of that pretty ignorant lovingness and trust - he had not yet any real need of it. But he was determined, if possible, to preserve the simplicity on which the charm depended; to keep Tessa a genuine contadina, and not place the small field-flower among conditions that would rob it of its grace. He would have been shocked to see her in the dress of any other rank than her own; the piquancy of her talk would be all gone, if things began to have new relations for her, if her world became wider, her pleasures less childish; and the squirrel-like enjoyment of nuts at discretion marked the standard of the luxuries he had provided for her. By this means, Tito saved Tessa's charm from being sullied; and he also, by a convenient coincidence, saved himself from aggravating expenses that were already rather importunate to a man whose money was all required for his avowed habits of life.

This, in brief, had been the history of Tito's relation to Tessa up to a very recent date. It is true that once or twice before Bardo's death, the sense that there was Tessa up the hill, with whom it was possible to pass an hour agreeably, had been an inducement to him to escape from a little weariness of the old man, when, for lack of any positive engagement, he might otherwise have borne the weariness patiently and shared Romola's burden. But the moment when he had first felt a real hunger for Tessa's ignorant lovingness and belief in him had not come till quite lately, and it was distinctly marked out by circumstances as little to be forgotten as the oncoming of a malady that has permanently vitiated the sight and hearing. It was the day when he had first seen Baldassarre, and had bought the armour. Returning across the bridge that night, with the coat of mail in his hands, he had felt an unconquerable shrinking from an immediate

encounter with Romola. She, too, knew little of the actual world; she, too, trusted him; but he had an uneasy consciousness that behind her frank eyes there was a nature that could judge him, and that any ill-founded trust of hers sprang not from pretty brute-like incapacity, but from a nobleness which might prove an alarming touchstone. He wanted a little ease, a little repose from self-control, after the agitation and exertions of the day; he wanted to be where he could adjust his mind to the morrow, without caring how he behaved at the present moment. And there was a sweet adoring creature within reach whose presence was as safe and unconstraining as that of her own kids, - who would believe any fable, and remain quite unimpressed by public opinion. And so on that evening, when Romola was waiting and listening for him, he turned his steps up the hill.

No wonder, then, that the steps took the same course on this evening, eleven days later, when he had had to recoil under Romola's first outburst of scorn. He could not wish Tessa in his wife's place, or refrain from wishing that his wife should be thoroughly reconciled to him; for it was Romola, and not Tessa, that belonged to the world where all the larger desires of a man who had ambition and effective faculties must necessarily lie. But he wanted a refuge from a standard disagreeably rigorous, of which he could not make himself independent simply by thinking it folly; and Tessa's little soul was that inviting refuge.

It was not much more than eight o'clock when he went up the stone steps to the door of Tessa's room. Usually she heard his entrance into the house, and ran to meet him, but not to-night; and when he opened the door he saw the reason. A single dim light was burning above the dying fire, and showed Tessa in a kneeling attitude by the head of the bed where the baby lay. Her head had fallen aside on the pillow, and her brown rosary, which usually hung above the pillow over the picture of the Madonna and the golden palm-branches, lay in the loose grasp of her right hand. She had gone fast asleep over her beads. Tito stepped lightly across the little room, and sat down close to her. She had probably heard the opening of the door as part of her dream, for he had not been looking at her two moments before she opened her eyes. She opened them without any start, and remained quite motionless looking at him, as if the sense that he was there smiling at her shut out any impulse which could disturb that happy passiveness. But when he put his hand under her chin, and stooped to kiss her, she said -

'I dreamed it, and then I said it was dreaming - and then I awoke, and it was true.'

'Little sinner!' said Tito, pinching her chin, 'you have not said half your prayers. I will punish you by not looking at your baby; it is ugly.'

Tessa did not like those words, even though Tito was smiling. She had some pouting distress in her face, as she said, bending anxiously over the baby -

'Ah, it is not true! He is prettier than anything. You do not think he is ugly. You will look at him. He is even prettier than when you saw him before - only he's asleep, and you can't see his eyes or his tongue, and I can't show you his hair - and it grows - isn't that wonderful? Look at him! It's true his face is very much all alike when he's asleep, there is not so much to see as when he's awake. If you kiss him very gently, he won't wake: you want to kiss him, is it not true?'

He satisfied her by giving the small mummy a butterfly kiss, and then putting his hand on her shoulder and turning her face towards him, said, 'You like looking at the baby better than looking at your husband, you false one!'

She was still kneeling, and now rested her hands on his knee, looking up at him like one of Fra Lippo Lippi's round-cheeked adoring angels.

'No,' she said, shaking her head; 'I love you always best, only I want you to look at the bambino and love him; I used only to want you to love me.'

'And did you expect me to come again so soon?' said Tito, inclined to make her prattle. He still felt the effects of the agitation he had undergone - still felt like a man who has been violently jarred; and this was the easiest relief from silence and solitude.

'Ah, no,' said Tessa, 'I have counted the days - to-day I began at my right thumb again - since you put on the beautiful chain-coat, that Messer San Michele gave you to take care of you on your journey. And you have got it on now,' she said, peeping through the opening in the breast of his tunic. 'Perhaps it made you come back sooner.'

'Perhaps it did, Tessa,' he said. 'But don't mind the coat now. Tell me what has happened since I was here. Did you see the tents in the Prato, and the soldiers and horsemen when they passed the bridges - did you hear the drums and trumpets?'

'Yes, and I was rather frightened, because I thought the soldiers might come up here. And Monna Lisa was a little afraid too, for she said they might carry our kids off; she said it was their business to do mischief. But the Holy Madonna took care of us, for we never saw one of them up here. But something has happened, only I hardly dare tell you, and that is what I was saying more Aves for.'

'What do you mean, Tessa?' said Tito, rather anxiously. 'Make haste and tell me.'

'Yes; but will you let me sit on your knee? because then I think I shall not be so frightened.'

He took her on his knee, and put his arm round her, but looked grave: it seemed that something unpleasant must pursue him even here.

'At first I didn't mean to tell you,' said Tessa, speaking almost in a whisper, as if that would mitigate the offence; 'because we thought the old man would be gone away before you came again, and it would be as if it had not been. But now he is there, and you are come, and I never did anything you told me not to do before. And I want to tell you, and then you will perhaps forgive me, for it is a long while before I go to confession.'

'Yes, tell me everything, my Tessa.' He began to hope it was after all a trivial matter.

'Oh, you will be sorry for him: I'm afraid he cries about something when I don't see him. But that was not the reason I went to him first; it was because I wanted to talk to him and show him my baby, and he was a stranger that lived nowhere, and I thought you wouldn't care so much about my talking to him. And I think he is not a bad old man, and he wanted to come and sleep on the straw next to the goats, and I made Monna Lisa say, 'Yes, he might,' and he's away all the day almost, but when he comes back I talk to him, and take him something to eat.'

'Some beggar, I suppose. It was naughty of you, Tessa, and I am angry with Monna Lisa. I must have him sent away.'

'No, I think he is not a beggar, for he wanted to pay Monna Lisa, only she asked him to do work for her instead. And he gets himself shaved, and his clothes are tidy: Monna Lisa says he is a decent man. But sometimes I think he is not in his right mind: Lupo, at Peretola, was not in his right mind, and he looks a little like Lupo sometimes, as if he didn't know where he was.'

'What sort of face has he?' said Tito, his heart beginning to beat strangely. He was so haunted by the thought of Baldassarre, that it was already he whom he saw in imagination sitting on the straw not many yards from him. 'Fetch your stool, my Tessa, and sit on it.'

'Shall you not forgive me?' she said, timidly, moving from his knee.

'Yes, I will not be angry - only sit down, and tell me what sort of old man this is.'

'I can't think how to tell you: he is not like my stepfather Nofri, or anybody. His face is yellow, and he has deep marks in it; and his hair is white, but there is none on the top of his head: and his eyebrows are black, and he looks from under them at me, and says, 'Poor thing!' to me, as if he thought I was beaten as I used to be; and that seems as if he couldn't be in his right mind, doesn't it? And I asked him his name once, but he couldn't tell it me: yet everybody has a name - is it not true? And he has a book now, and keeps looking at it ever so long, as if he were a Padre. But I think he is not saying prayers, for his lips never move; - ah, you are angry with me, or is it because you are sorry for the old man?'

Tito's eyes were still fixed on Tessa; but he had ceased to see her, and was only seeing the objects her words suggested. It was this absent glance which frightened her, and she could not help going to kneel at his side again. But he did not heed her, and she dared not touch him, or speak to him: she knelt, trembling and wondering; and this state of mind suggesting her beads to her, she took them from the floor and began to tell them again, her pretty lips moving silently and her blue eyes wide with anxiety and struggling tears.

Tito was quite unconscious of her movements - unconscious of his own attitude: he was in that wrapt state in which a man will grasp painful roughness, and press and press it closer, and never feel it. A new possibility had risen before him, which might dissolve at once the wretched conditions of fear and suppression that were marring his life. Destiny had brought within his reach an opportunity of retrieving that moment on the steps of the Duomo, when the Past had grasped him with living quivering hands, and he had disowned it. A few steps, and he might be face to face with his father, with no witness by; he might seek forgiveness and reconciliation; and there was money now, from the sale of the library, to enable them to leave Florence without disclosure, and go into Southern Italy, where under the probable French rule, he had already laid a foundation for patronage. Romola need never know the whole truth, for she could have no certain means of identifying that prisoner in the Duomo with Baldassarre, or of learning what had taken place on the steps, except from Baldassarre himself; and if his father forgave, he would also consent to bury, that offence.

But with this possibility of relief, by an easy spring, from present evil, there rose the other possibility, that the fierce-hearted man might refuse to be propitiated. Well - and if he did, things would only be as they had been before; for there would be no witness by. It was not repentance with a white sheet round it and taper in hand, confessing

its hated sin in the eyes of men, that Tito was preparing for: it was a repentance that would make all things pleasant again, and keep all past unpleasant things secret. And Tito's soft-heartedness, his indisposition to feel himself in harsh relations with any creature, was in strong activity towards his father, now his father was brought near to him. It would be a state of ease that his nature could not but desire, if the poisonous hatred in Baldassarre's glance could be replaced by something of the old affection and complacency.

Tito longed to have his world once again completely cushioned with goodwill, and longed for it the more eagerly because of what he had just suffered from the collision with Romola. It was not difficult to him to smile pleadingly on those whom he had injured, and offer to do them much kindness: and no quickness of intellect could tell him exactly the taste of that honey on the lips of the injured. The opportunity was there, and it raised an inclination which hemmed in the calculating activity of his thought. He started up, and stepped towards the door; but Tessa's cry, as she dropped her beads, roused him from his absorption. He turned and said -

'My Tessa, get me a lantern; and don't cry, little pigeon, I am not angry.'

They went down the stairs, and Tessa was going to shout the need of the lantern in Monna Lisa's ear, when Tito, who had opened the door, said, 'Stay, Tessa - no, I want no lantern: go up-stairs again, and keep quiet, and say nothing to Monna Lisa.'

In half a minute he stood before the closed door of the outhouse, where the moon was shining white on the old paintless wood.

In this last decisive moment, Tito felt a tremor upon him - a sudden instinctive shrinking from a possible tiger-glance, a possible tiger-leap. Yet why should he, a young man, be afraid of an old one? a young man with armour on, of an old man without a weapon? It was but a moment's hesitation, and Tito laid his hand on the door. Was his father asleep? Was there nothing else but the door that screened him from the voice and the glance which no magic could turn into ease?

Baldassarre was not asleep. There was a square opening high in the wall of the hovel, through which the moonbeams sent in a stream of pale light; and if Tito could have looked through the opening, he would have seen his father seated on the straw, with something that shone like a white star in his hand. Baldassarre was feeling the edge of his poniard, taking refuge in that sensation from a hopeless blank of thought that seemed to lie like a great gulf between his passion and its aim.

He was in one of his most wretched moments of conscious helplessness: he had been poring, while it was light, over the book that lay open beside him; then he had been trying to recall the names of his jewels, and the symbols engraved on them, and though at certain other times he had recovered some of those names and symbols, to-night they were all gone into darkness. And this effort at inward seeing had seemed to end in utter paralysis of memory. He was reduced to a sort of mad consciousness that he was a solitary pulse of just rage in a world filled with defiant baseness. He had clutched and unsheathed his dagger, and for a long while had been feeling its edge, his mind narrowed to one image, and the dream of one-sensation - the sensation of plunging that dagger into a base heart, which he was unable to pierce in any other way.

Tito had his hand on the door and was pulling it: it dragged against the ground as such old doors often do, and Baldassarre, startled out of his dreamlike state, rose from his sitting posture in vague amazement, not knowing where he was. He had not yet risen to his feet, and was still kneeling on one knee, when the door came wide open and he saw, dark against the moonlight, with the rays falling on one bright mass of curls and one rounded olive cheek, the image of his reverie - not shadowy - close and real like water at the lips after the thirsty dream of it. No thought could come athwart that eager thirst. In one moment, before Tito could start back, the old man, with the preternatural force of rage in his limbs, had sprung forward, and the dagger had flashed out. In the next moment the dagger had snapped in two, and Baldassarre, under the parrying force of Tito's arm, had fallen back on the straw, clutching the hilt with its bit of broken blade. The pointed end lay shining against Tito's feet.

Tito had felt one great heart-leap of terror as he had staggered under the weight of the thrust: he felt now the triumph of deliverance and safety. His armour had been proved, and vengeance lay helpless before him. But the triumph raised no devilish impulse; on the contrary, the sight of his father close to him and unable to injure him, made the effort at reconciliation easier. He was free from fear, but he had only the more unmixed and direct want to be free from the sense that he was hated. After they had looked at each other a little while, Baldassarre lying motionless in despairing rage, Tito said in his soft tones, just as they had sounded before the last parting on the shores of Greece -

'Padre mio!' There was a pause after those words, but no movement or sound till he said -

'I came to ask your forgiveness!'

Again he paused, that the healing balm of those words might have time to work. But there was no sign of change in Baldassarre: he lay as he had fallen, leaning on one arm: he was trembling, but it was from the shock that had thrown him down.

'I was taken by surprise that morning. I wish now to be a son to you again. I wish to make the rest of your life happy, that you may forget what you have suffered.'

He paused again. He had used the clearest and strongest words he could think of. It was useless to say more, until he had some sign that Baldassarre understood him. Perhaps his mind was too distempered or too imbecile even for that: perhaps the shock of his fall and his disappointed rage might have quite suspended the use of his faculties.

Presently Baldassarre began to move. He threw away the broken dagger, and slowly and gradually, still trembling, began to raise himself from the ground. Tito put out his hand to help him, and so strangely quick are men's souls that in this moment, when he began to feel his atonement was accepted, he had a darting thought of the irksome efforts it entailed. Baldassarre clutched the hand that was held out, raised himself and clutched it still, going close up to Tito till their faces were not a foot off each other. Then he began to speak, in a deep trembling voice -

'I saved you - I nurtured you - I loved you. You forsook me - you robbed me - you denied me. What can you give me? You have made the world bitterness to me; but there is on draught of sweetness left - that you shall know agony.'

He let fall Tito's hand, and going backwards a little, first rested his arm on a projecting stone in the wall, and then sank again in a sitting posture on the straw. The outleap of fury in the dagger-thrust had evidently exhausted him.

Tito stood silent. If it had been a deep yearning emotion which had brought him to ask his father's forgiveness, the denial of it might have caused him a pang which would have excluded the rushing train of thought that followed those decisive words. As it was, though the sentence of unchangeable hatred grated on him and jarred him terribly, his mind glanced round with a self-preserving instinct to see how far those words could have the force of a substantial threat. When he had come down to speak to Baldassarre, he had said to himself that if his effort at reconciliation failed, things would only be as they had been before. The first glance of his mind was backward to that thought again, but the future possibilities of danger that were conjured up along with it brought the perception that things were not as they had been before, and the perception came as a triumphant

relief. There was not only the broken dagger, there was the certainty, from what Tessa had told him, that Baldassarre's mind was broken too, and had no edge that could reach him. Tito felt he had no choice now: he must defy Baldassarre as a mad, imbecile old man; and the chances were so strongly on his side that there was hardly room for fear. No; except the fear of having to do many unpleasant things in order to save himself from what was yet more unpleasant. And one of those unpleasant things must be done immediately: it was very difficult.

'Do you mean to stay here?' he said.

'No,' said Baldassarre, bitterly, 'you mean to turn me out.'

'Not so,' said Tito; 'I only ask.'

'I tell you, you have turned me out. If it is your straw, you turned me off it three years ago.'

'Then you mean to leave this place?' said Tito, more anxious about this certainty than the ground of it.

'I have spoken,' said Baldassarre.

Tito turned and re-entered the house. Monna Lisa was nodding; he went up to Tessa. and found her crying by the side of her baby.

'Tessa,' he said, sitting down and taking her head between his hands; 'leave off crying, little goose, and listen to me.'

He lifted her chin upward, that she might look at him, while he spoke very distinctly and emphatically.

'You must never speak to that old man again. He is a mad old man, and he wants to kill me. Never speak to him or listen to him again.'

Tessa's tears had ceased, and her lips were pale with fright.

'Is he gone away?' she whispered.

'He will go away. Remember what I have said to you.'

'Yes; I will never speak to a stranger any more,' said Tessa, with a sense of guilt.

He told her, to comfort her, that he would come again tomorrow; and then went down to Monna Lisa to rebuke her severely for letting a dangerous man come about the house.

Tito felt that these were odious tasks; they were very evil-tasted morsels, but they were forced upon him. He heard Monna Lisa fasten the door behind him, and turned away, without looking towards the open door of the hovel. He felt secure that Baldassarre would go, and he could not wait to see him go. Even his young frame and elastic spirit were shattered by the agitations that had been crowded into this single evening.

Baldassarre was still sitting on the straw when the shadow of Tito passed by. Before him lay the fragments of the broken dagger; beside him lay the open book, over which he had pored in vain. They looked like mocking symbols of his utter helplessness; and his body was still too trembling for him to rise and walk away.

But the next morning very early, when Tessa peeped anxiously through the hole in her shutter, the door of the hovel was open, and the strange old man was gone.