

Chapter 35 - What Florence was Thinking of

For several days Tito saw little of Romola. He told her gently, the next morning, that it would be better for her to remove any small articles of her own from the library, as there would be agents coming to pack up the antiquities. Then, leaning to kiss her on the brow, he suggested that she should keep in her own room where the little painted tabernacle was, and where she was then sitting, so that she might be away from the noise of strange footsteps. Romola assented quietly, making no sign of emotion: the night had been one long waking to her, and, in spite of her healthy frame, sensation had become a dull continuous pain, as if she had been stunned and bruised. Tito divined that she felt ill, but he dared say no more; he only dared, perceiving that her hand and brow were stone cold, to fetch a furred mantle and throw it lightly round her. And in every brief interval that he returned to her, the scene was nearly the same: he tried to propitiate her by some unobtrusive act or word of tenderness, and she seemed to have lost the power of speaking to him, or of looking at him. 'Patience!' he said to himself. 'She will recover it, and forgive at last. The tie to me must still remain the strongest.' When the stricken person is slow to recover and look as if nothing had happened, the striker easily glides into the position of the aggrieved party; he feels no bruise himself, and is strongly conscious of his own amiable behaviour since he inflicted the blow. But Tito was not naturally disposed to feel himself aggrieved; the constant bent of his mind was towards propitiation, and he would have submitted to much for the sake of feeling Romola's hand resting on his head again, as it did that morning when he first shrank from looking at her.

But he found it the less difficult to wait patiently for the return of his home happiness, because his life out of doors was more and more interesting to him. A course of action which is in strictness a slowly-prepared outgrowth of the entire character, is yet almost always traceable to a single impression as its point of apparent origin; and since that moment in the Piazza del Duomo, when Tito, mounted on the bales, had tasted a keen pleasure in the consciousness of his ability to tickle the ears of men with any phrases that pleased them, his imagination had glanced continually towards a sort of political activity which the troubled public life of Florence was likely enough to find occasion for. But the fresh dread of Baldassarre, waked in the same moment, had lain like an immovable rocky obstruction across that path, and had urged him into the sale of the library, as a preparation for the possible necessity of leaving Florence, at the very time when he was beginning to feel that it had a new attraction for him. That dread was nearly removed now: he must wear his armour still, he must prepare himself for possible demands on his coolness and ingenuity, but he did not feel obliged to take the inconvenient step of leaving Florence and seeking new fortunes. His father had

refused the offered atonement - had forced him into defiance, and an old man in a strange place, with his memory gone, was weak enough to be defied.

Tito's implicit desires were working themselves out now in very explicit thoughts. As the freshness of young passion faded, life was taking more and more decidedly for him the aspect of a game in which there was an agreeable mingling of skill and chance.

And the game that might be played in Florence promised to be rapid and exciting; it was a game of revolutionary and party struggle, sure to include plenty of that unavowed action in which brilliant ingenuity, able to get rid of all inconvenient beliefs except that 'ginger is hot in the mouth,' is apt to see the path of superior wisdom.

No sooner were the French guests gone than Florence was as agitated as a colony of ants when an alarming shadow has been removed, and the camp has to be repaired. 'How are we to raise the money for the French king? How are we to manage the war with those obstinate Pisan rebels? Above all, how are we to mend our plan of government, so as to hit on the best way of getting our magistrates chosen and our laws voted?' Till those questions were well answered trade was in danger of standing still, and that large body of the working men who were not counted as citizens and had not so much as a vote to serve as an anodyne to their stomachs were likely to get impatient. Something must be done.

And first the great bell was sounded, to call the citizens to a parliament in the Piazza de' Signori; and when the crowd was wedged close, and hemmed in by armed men at all the outlets, the Signoria (or Gonfaloniere and eight Priors for the time being) came out and stood by the stone lion on the platform in front of the Old Palace, and proposed that twenty chief men of the city should have dictatorial authority given them, by force of which they should for one year choose all magistrates, and set the frame of government in order. And the people shouted their assent, and felt themselves the electors of the Twenty. This kind of 'parliament' was a very old Florentine fashion, by which the will of the few was made to seem the choice of the many.

The shouting in the Piazza was soon at an end, but not so the debating inside the palace: was Florence to have a Great Council after the Venetian mode, where all the officers of government might be elected, and all laws voted by a wide number of citizens of a certain age and of ascertained qualifications, without question of rank or party? or, was it to be governed on a narrower and less popular scheme, in which the hereditary influence of good families would be less adulterated with the votes of shopkeepers. Doctors of law disputed day after day, and far on into the night. Messer Pagolantonio

Soderini alleged excellent reasons on the side of the popular scheme; Messer Guidantonio Vespucci alleged reasons equally excellent on the side of a more aristocratic form. It was a question of boiled or roast, which had been prejudged - by the palates of the disputants, and the excellent arguing might have been protracted a long while without any other result than that of deferring the cooking. The majority of the men inside the palace, having power already in their hands, agreed with Vespucci, and thought change should be moderate; the majority outside the palace, conscious of little power and many grievances, were less afraid of change.

And there was a force outside the palace which was gradually tending to give the vague desires of that majority the character of a determinate will. That force was the preaching of Savonarola. Impelled partly by the spiritual necessity that was laid upon him to guide the people, and partly by the prompting of public men who could get no measures carried without his aid, he was rapidly passing in his daily sermons from the general to the special - from telling his hearers that they must postpone their private passions and interests to the public good, to telling them precisely what sort of government they must have in order to promote that good - from 'Choose whatever is best for all' to 'Choose the Great Council,' and 'the Great Council is the will of God.'

To Savonarola these were as good as identical propositions. The Great Council was the only practicable plan for giving an expression to the public will large enough to counteract the vitiating influence of party interests: it was a plan that would make honest impartial public action at least possible. And the purer the government of Florence would become - the more secure from the designs of men who saw their own advantage in the moral debasement of their fellows - the nearer would the Florentine people approach the character of a pure community, worthy to lead the way in the renovation of the Church and the world. And Fra Girolamo's mind never stopped short of that sublimest end: the objects towards which he felt himself working had always the same moral magnificence. He had no private malice - he sought no petty gratification. Even in the last terrible days, when ignominy, torture, and the fear of torture, had laid bare every hidden weakness of his soul, he could say to his importunate judges: 'Do not wonder if it seems to you that I have told but few things; for my purposes were few and great.'