

Chapter 38 - The Black Marks become Magical

That journey of Tito's to Rome, which had removed many difficulties from Romola's departure, had been resolved on quite suddenly, at a supper, only the evening before.

Tito had set out towards that supper with agreeable expectations. The meats were likely to be delicate, the wines choice, the company distinguished; for the place of entertainment was the Selva or Orto de' Rucellai, or, as we should say, the Rucellai Gardens; and the host, Bernardo Rucellai, was quite a typical Florentine grandee. Even his family name has a significance which is prettily symbolic: properly understood, it may bring before us a little lichen, popularly named orcella or roccella, which grows on the rocks of Greek isles and in the Canaries; and having drunk a great deal of light into its little stems and button-heads, will, under certain circumstances, give it out again as a reddish purple dye, very grateful to the eyes of men. By bringing the excellent secret of this dye, called oricello, from the Levant to Florence, a certain merchant, who lived nearly a hundred years before our Bernardo's time, won for himself and his descendants much wealth, and the pleasantly-suggestive surname of Oricellari, or Roccellari, which on Tuscan tongues speedily became Rucellai.

And our Bernardo, who stands out more prominently than the rest on this purple background, had added all sorts of distinction to the family name: he had married the sister of Lorenzo de' Medici, and had had the most splendid wedding in the memory of Florentine upholstery; and for these and other virtues he had been sent on embassies to France and Venice, and had been chosen Gonfaloniere; he had not only built himself a fine palace, but had finished putting the black and white marble facade to the church of Santa Maria Novella; he had planted a garden with rare trees, and had made it classic ground by receiving within it the meetings of the Platonic Academy, orphaned by the death of Lorenio; he had written an excellent, learned book, of a new topographical sort, about ancient Rome; he had collected antiquities; he had a pure Latinity. The simplest account of him, one sees, reads like a laudatory epitaph, at the end of which the Greek and Ausonian Muses might be confidently requested to tear their hair, and Nature to desist from any second attempt to combine so many virtues with one set of viscera.

His invitation had been conveyed to Tito through Lorenzo Tornabuoni, with an emphasis which would have suggested that the object of the gathering was political, even if the public questions of the time had been less absorbing. As it was, Tito felt sure that some party purposes were to be furthered by the excellent flavours of stewed fish and old Greek wine; for Bernardo Rucellai was not simply an influential personage, he was one of the elect Twenty who for three weeks had

held the reins of Florence. This assurance put Tito in the best spirits as he made his way to the Via della Scala, where the classic garden was to be found: without it, he might have had some uneasy speculation as to whether the high company he would have the honour of meeting was likely to be dull as well as distinguished; for he had had experience of various dull suppers even in the Rucellai gardens, and especially of the dull philosophic sort, wherein he had not only been called upon to accept an entire scheme of the universe (which would have been easy to him) but to listen to an exposition of the same, from the origin of things to their complete ripeness in the tractate of the philosopher then speaking.

It was a dark evening, and it was only when Tito crossed the occasional light of a lamp suspended before an image of the Virgin, that the outline of his figure was discernible enough for recognition. At such moments any one caring to watch his passage from one of these lights to another might have observed that the tall and graceful personage with the mantle folded round him was followed constantly by a very different form, thick-set and elderly, in a serge tunic and felt hat. The conjunction might have been taken for mere chance, since there were many passengers along the streets at this hour. But when Tito stopped at the gate of the Rucellai gardens, the figure behind stopped too. The sportello, or smaller door of the gate, was already being held open by the servant, who, in the distraction of attending to some question, had not yet closed it since the last arrival, and Tito turned in rapidly, giving his name to the servant, and passing on between the evergreen bushes that shone like metal in the torchlight. The follower turned in too.

'Your name?' said the servant.

'Baldassarre Calvo,' was the immediate answer.

'You are not a guest; the guests have all passed.'

'I belong to Tito Melema, who has just gone in. I am to wait in the gardens.'

The servant hesitated. 'I had orders to admit only guests. Are you a servant of Messer Tito?'

'No, friend, I am not a servant; I am a scholar.'

There are men to whom you need only say, 'I am a buffalo,' in a certain tone of quiet confidence, and they will let you pass. The porter gave way at once, Baldassarre entered, and heard the door closed and chained behind him, as he too disappeared among the shining bushes.

Those ready and firm answers argued a great change in Baldassarre since the last meeting face to face with Tito, when the dagger broke in two. The change had declared itself in a startling way.

At the moment when the shadow of Tito passed in front of the hovel as he departed homeward, Baldassarre was sitting in that state of after-tremor known to every one who is liable to great outbursts of passion: a state in which physical powerlessness is sometimes accompanied by an exceptional lucidity of thought, as if that disengagement of excited passion had carried away a fire-mist and left clearness behind it. He felt unable to rise and walk away just yet; his limbs seemed benumbed; he was cold, and his hands shook. But in that bodily helplessness he sat surrounded, not by the habitual dimness and vanishing shadows, but by the clear images of the past; he was living again in an unbroken course through that life which seemed a long preparation for the taste of bitterness.

For some minutes he was too thoroughly absorbed by the images to reflect on the fact that he saw them, and note the fact as a change. But when that sudden dearness had travelled through the distance, and came at last to rest on the scene just gone by, he felt fully where he was: he remembered Monna Lisa and Tessa. Ah! he then was the mysterious husband; he who had another wife in the Via de' Bardi. It was time to pick up the broken dagger and go - go and leave no trace of himself; for to hide his feebleness seemed the thing most like power that was left to him. He leaned to take up the fragments of the dagger; then he turned towards the book which lay open at his side. It was a fine large manuscript, an odd volume of Pausanias. The moonlight was upon it, and he could see the large letters at the head of the page:

MESSENIKA. KB'.

In old days he had known Pausanias familiarly; yet an hour or two ago he had been looking hopelessly at that page, and it had suggested no more meaning to him than if the letters had been black weather-marks on a wall; but at this moment they were once more the magic signs that conjure up a world. That moonbeam falling on the letters had raised Messenia before him, and its struggle against the Spartan oppression.

He snatched up the book, but the light was too pale for him to read further by. No matter: he knew that chapter; he read inwardly. He saw the stoning of the traitor Aristocrates - stoned by a whole people, who cast him out from their borders to lie unburied, and set up a pillar with verses upon it telling how Time had brought home justice to the unjust. The words arose within him, and stirred innumerable vibrations of memory. He forgot that he was old: he could almost have shouted. The light was come again, mother of knowledge and joy! In

that exultation his limbs recovered their strength: he started up with his broken dagger and book, and went out under the broad moonlight.

It was a nipping frosty air, but Baldassarre could feel no chill - he only felt the glow of conscious power. He walked about and paused on all the open spots of that high ground, and looked down on the domed and towered city, sleeping darkly under its sleeping guardians, the mountains; on the pale gleam of the river; on the valley vanishing towards the peaks of snow; and felt himself master of them all.

That sense of mental empire which belongs to us all in moments of exceptional clearness was intensified for him by the long days and nights in which memory had been little more than the consciousness of something gone. That city, which had been a weary labyrinth, was material that he could subdue to his purposes now: his mind glanced through its affairs with flashing conjecture; he was once more a man who knew cities, whose sense of vision was instructed with large experience, and who felt the keen delight of holding all things in the grasp of language. Names! Images! - his mind rushed through its wealth without pausing, like one who enters on a great inheritance.

But amidst all that rushing eagerness there was one End presiding in Baldassarre's consciousness, - a dark deity in the inmost cell, who only seemed forgotten while his hecatomb was being prepared. And when the first triumph in the certainty of recovered power had had its way, his thoughts centred themselves on Tito. That fair slippery viper could not escape him now; thanks to struggling justice, the heart that never quivered with tenderness for another had its sensitive selfish fibres that could be reached by the sharp point of anguish. The soul that bowed to no right, bowed to the great lord of mortals, Pain.

He could search into every secret of Tito's life now: he knew some of the secrets already, and the failure of the broken dagger, which seemed like frustration, had been the beginning of achievement. Doubtless that sudden rage had shaken away the obstruction which stifled his soul. Twice before, when his memory had partially returned, it had been in consequence of sudden excitation: once when he had had to defend himself from an enraged dog; once when he had been overtaken by the waves, and had had to scramble up a rock to save himself.

Yes, but if this time, as then, the light were to die out, and the dreary conscious blank come back again! This time the light was stronger and steadier; but what security was there that before the morrow the dark fog would not be round him again? Even the fear seemed like the beginning of feebleness: he thought with alarm that he might sink the faster for this excited vigil of his on the hill, which was expending his force; and after seeking anxiously for a sheltered corner where he

might lie down, he nestled at last against a heap of warm garden straw, and so fell asleep.

When he opened his eyes again it was daylight. The first moments were filled with strange bewilderment: he was a man with a double identity; to which had he awaked? to the life of dim-sighted sensibilities like the sad heirship of some fallen greatness, or to the life of recovered power? Surely the last, for the events of the night all came back to him: the recognition of the page in Pausanias, the crowding resurgence of facts and names, the sudden wide prospect which had given him such a moment as that of the Maenad in the glorious amaze of her morning waking on the mountain top.

He took up the book again, he read, he remembered without reading. He saw a name, and the images of deeds rose with it: he saw the mention of a deed, and he linked it with a name. There were stories of inexorable crimes, but stories also of guilt that seemed successful. There were sanctuaries for swift-footed miscreants: baseness had its armour, and the weapons of justice sometimes broke against it. What then? If baseness triumphed everywhere else, if it could heap to itself all the goods of the world and even hold the keys of hell, it would never triumph over the hatred which it had itself awakened. It could devise no torture that would seem greater than the torture of submitting to its smile. Baldassarre felt the indestructible independent force of a supreme emotion, which knows no terror, and asks for no motive, which is itself an ever-burning motive, consuming all other desire. And now in this morning light, when the assurance came again that the fine fibres of association were active still, and that his recovered self had not departed, all his gladness was but the hope of vengeance.

From that time till the evening on which we have seen him enter the Rucellai gardens, he had been incessantly, but cautiously, inquiring into Tito's position and all his circumstances, and there was hardly a day on which he did not contrive to follow his movements. But he wished not to arouse any alarm in Tito: he wished to secure a moment when the hated favourite of blind fortune was at the summit of confident ease, surrounded by chief men on whose favour he depended. It was not any retributive payment or recognition of himself for his own behoof, on which Baldassarre's whole soul was bent: it was to find the sharpest edge of disgrace and shame by which a selfish smiler could be pierced; it was to send through his marrow the most sudden shock of dread. He was content to lie hard, and live stintedly - he had spent the greater part of his remaining money in buying another poniard: his hunger and his thirst were after nothing exquisite but an exquisite vengeance. He had avoided addressing himself to any one whom he suspected of intimacy with Tito, lest an alarm raised in Tito's mind should urge him either to flight or to some

other counteracting measure which hard-pressed ingenuity might devise. For this reason he had never entered Nello's shop, which he observed that Tito frequented, and he had turned aside to avoid meeting Piero di Cosimo.

The possibility of frustration gave added eagerness to his desire that the great opportunity he sought should not be deferred. The desire was eager in him on another ground; he trembled lest his memory should go again. Whether from the agitating presence of that fear, or from some other causes, he had twice felt a sort of mental dizziness, in which the inward sense or imagination seemed to be losing the distinct forms of things. Once he had attempted to enter the Palazzo Vecchio and make his way into a council-chamber where Tito was, and had failed. But now, on this evening, he felt that his occasion was come.