

## **Chapter 42 - Romola in her Place**

It was the thirtieth of October 1496. The sky that morning was clear enough, and there was a pleasant autumnal breeze. But the Florentines just then thought very little about the land breezes: they were thinking of the gales at sea, which seemed to be uniting with all other powers to disprove the Frate's declaration that Heaven took special care of Florence.

For those terrible gales had driven away from the coast of Leghorn certain ships from Marseilles, freighted with soldiery and corn: and Florence was in the direst need, first of food, and secondly of fighting men. Pale Famine was in her streets, and her territory was threatened on all its borders.

For the French king, that new Charlemagne, who had entered Italy in anticipatory triumph, and had conquered Naples without the least trouble, had gone away again fifteen months ago, and was even, it was feared, in his grief for the loss of a new-born son, losing the languid intention of coming back again to redress grievances and set the Church in order. A league had been formed against him - a Holy League, with Pope Borgia at its head - to 'drive out the barbarians,' who still garrisoned the fortress of Naples. That had a patriotic sound; but, looked at more closely, the Holy League seemed very much like an agreement among certain wolves to drive away all other wolves, and then to see which among themselves could snatch the largest share of the prey. And there was a general disposition to regard Florence not as a fellow-wolf, but rather as a desirable carcass. Florence, therefore, of all the chief Italian States, had alone declined to join the League, adhering still to the French alliance.

She had declined at her peril. At this moment Pisa, still fighting savagely for liberty, was being encouraged not only by strong forces from Venice and Milan, but by the presence of the German Emperor Maximilian, who had been invited by the League, and was joining the Pisans with such troops as he had in the attempt to get possession of Leghorn, while the coast was invested by Venetian and Genoese ships. And if Leghorn should fall into the hands of the enemy, woe to Florence! For if that one outlet towards the sea were closed, hedged in as she was on the land by the bitter ill-will of the Pope and the jealousy of smaller States, how could succours reach her?

The government of Florence had shown a great heart in this urgent need, meeting losses and defeats with vigorous effort, raising fresh money, raising fresh soldiers, but not neglecting the good old method of Italian defence - conciliatory embassies. And while the scarcity of food was every day becoming greater, they had resolved, in opposition to old precedent, not to shut out the starving country people, and the

mendicants driven from the gates of other cities, who came flocking to Florence like birds from a land of snow.

These acts of a government in which the disciples of Savonarola made the strongest element were not allowed to pass without criticism. The disaffected were plentiful, and they saw clearly that the government took the worst course for the public welfare. Florence ought to join the League and make common cause with the other great Italian States, instead of drawing down their hostility by a futile adherence to a foreign ally. Florence ought to take care of her own citizens, instead of opening her gates to famine and pestilence in the shape of starving contadini and alien mendicants.

Every day the distress became sharper: every day the murmurs became louder. And, to crown the difficulties of the government, for a month and more - in obedience to a mandate from Rome - Fra Girolamo had ceased to preach. But on the arrival of the terrible news that the ships from Marseilles had been driven back, and that no corn was coming, the need for the voice that could infuse faith and patience into the people became too imperative to be resisted. In defiance of the Papal mandate the Signoria requested Savonarola to preach. And two days ago he had mounted again the pulpit of the Duomo, and had told the people only to wait and be steadfast and the divine help would certainly come.

It was a bold sermon: he consented to have his frock stripped off him if, when Florence persevered in fulfilling the duties of piety and citizenship, God did not come to her rescue.

Yet at present, on this morning of the thirtieth, there were no signs of rescue. Perhaps if the precious Tabernacle of the Madonna dell' Impruneta were brought into Florence and carried in devout procession to the Duomo, that Mother, rich in sorrows and therefore in mercy, would plead for the suffering city? For a century and a half there were records how the Florentines, suffering from drought, or flood, or famine, or pestilence, or the threat of wars, had fetched the potent image within their walls, and had found deliverance. And grateful honour had been done to her and her ancient church of L'Impruneta; the high house of Buondelmonti, patrons of the church, had to guard her hidden image with bare sword; wealth had been poured out for prayers at her shrine, for chantings, and chapels, and everburning lights; and lands had been added, till there was much quarrelling for the privilege of serving her. The Florentines were deeply convinced of her graciousness to them, so that the sight of her tabernacle within their walls was like the parting of the cloud, and the proverb ran, that the Florentines had a Madonna who would do what they pleased.

When were they in more need of her pleading pity than now? And already, the evening before, the tabernacle containing the miraculous hidden image had been brought with high and reverend escort from L'Impruneta, the privileged spot six miles beyond the gate of San Piero that looks towards Rome, and had been deposited in the church of San Gaggio, outside the gate, whence it was to be fetched in solemn procession by all the fraternities, trades and authorities of Florence.

But the Pitying Mother had not yet entered within the walls, and the morning arose on unchanged misery and despondency. Pestilence was hovering in the track of famine. Not only the hospitals were full, but the courtyards of private houses had been turned into refuges and infirmaries; and still there was unsheltered want. And early this morning, as usual, members of the various fraternities who made it part of their duty to bury the unfriended dead, were bearing away the corpses that had sunk by the wayside. As usual, sweet womanly forms, with the refined air and carriage of the well-born, but in the plainest garb, were moving about the streets on their daily errands of tending the sick and relieving the hungry.

One of these forms was easily distinguishable as Romola de' Bardi. Clad in the simplest garment of black serge, with a plain piece of black drapery drawn over her head, so as to hide all her hair, except the bands of gold that rippled apart on her brow, she was advancing from the Ponte Vecchio towards the Por' Santa Maria - the street in a direct line with the bridge - when she found her way obstructed by the pausing of a bier, which was being carried by members of the company of San Jacopo del Popolo, in search for the unburied dead. The brethren at the head of the bier were stooping to examine something, while a group of idle workmen, with features paled and sharpened by hunger, were clustering around and all talking at once.

'He's dead, I tell you! Messer Domeneddio has loved him well enough to take him.'

'Ah, and it would be well for us all if we could have our legs stretched out and go with our heads two or three bracci foremost! It's ill standing upright with hunger to prop you.'

'Well, well, he's an old fellow. Death has got a poor bargain. Life's had the best of him.'

'And no Florentine, ten to one! A beggar turned out of Siena. San Giovanni defend us! They've no need of soldiers to fight us. They send us an army of starving men.'

'No, no! This man is one of the prisoners turned out of the Stinche. I know by the grey patch where the prison badge was.'

'Keep quiet! Lend a hand! Don't you see the brethren are going to lift him on the bier?'

'It's likely he's alive enough if he could only look it. The soul may be inside him if it had only a drop of vernaccia to warm it.'

'In truth, I think he is not dead,' said one of the brethren when they had lifted him on the bier. 'He has perhaps only sunk down for want of food.'

'Let me try to give him some wine,' said Romola, coming forward. She loosened the small flask which she carried at her belt, and, leaning towards the prostrate body, with a deft hand she applied a small ivory implement between the teeth, and poured into the mouth a few drops of wine. The stimulus acted: the wine was evidently swallowed. She poured more, till the head was moved a little towards her, and the eyes of the old man opened full upon her with the vague look of returning consciousness.

Then for the first time a sense of complete recognition came over Romola. Those wild dark eyes opening in the sallow deep-lined face, with the white beard, which was now long again, were like an unmistakable signature to a remembered hand-writing. The light of two summers had not made that image any fainter in Romola's memory: the image of the escaped prisoner, whom she had seen in the Duomo the day when Tito first wore the armour - at whose grasp Tito was paled with terror in the strange sketch she had seen in Piero's studio. A wretched tremor and palpitation seized her. Now at last, perhaps, she was going to know some secret which might be more bitter than all that had gone before. She felt an impulse to dart away as from a sight of horror; and again, a more imperious need to keep close by the side of this old man whom, the divination of keen feeling told her, her husband had injured. In the very instant of this conflict she still leaned towards him and kept her right hand ready to administer more wine, while her left was passed under his neck. Her hands trembled, but their habit of soothing helpfulness would have served to guide them without the direction of her thought.

Baldassarre was looking at her for the first time. The close seclusion in which Romola's trouble had kept her in the weeks preceding her flight and his arrest, had denied him the opportunity he had sought of seeing the Wife who lived in the Via de' Bardi: and at this moment the descriptions he had heard of the fair golden-haired woman were all gone, like yesterday's waves.

'Will it not be well to carry him to the steps of San Stefano?' said Romola. 'We shall cease then to stop up the street, and you can go on your way with your bier.'

They had only to move onward for about thirty yards before reaching the steps of San Stefano, and by this time Baldassarre was able himself to make some efforts towards getting off the bier, and propping himself on the steps against the church doorway. The charitable brethren passed on, but the group of interested spectators, who had nothing to do and much to say, had considerably increased. The feeling towards the old man was not so entirely friendly now it was quite certain that he was alive, but the respect inspired by Romola's presence caused the passing remarks to be made in a rather more subdued tone than before.

'Ah, they gave him his morsel every day in the Stinche - that's why he can't do so well without it. You and I, Cecco, know better what it is to go to bed fasting.'

'Gnaffe! that's why the Magnificent Eight have turned out some of the prisoners, that they may shelter honest people instead. But if every thief is to be brought to life with good wine and wheaten bread, we Ciompi had better go and fill ourselves in Arno while the water's plenty.'

Romola had seated herself on the steps by Baldassarre, and was saying, 'Can you eat a little bread now? perhaps by-and-by you will be able, if I leave it with you. I must go on, because I have promised to be at the hospital. But I will come back if you will wait here, and then I will take you to some shelter. Do you understand? Will you wait? I will come back.'

He looked dreamily at her, and repeated her words, 'come back.' It was no wonder that his mind was enfeebled by his bodily exhaustion, but she hoped that he apprehended her meaning. She opened her basket, which was filled with pieces of soft bread, and put one of the pieces into his hand.

'Do you keep your bread for those that can't swallow, madonna?' said a rough-looking fellow, in a red night-cap, who had elbowed his way into the inmost circle of spectators - a circle that was pressing rather closely on Romola.

'If anybody isn't hungry,' said another, 'I say, let him alone. He's better off than people who've got craving stomachs and no breakfast.'

'Yes, indeed; if a man's a mind to die, it's a time to encourage him, instead of making him come back to life against his will. Dead men want no trencher.'

'Oh, you don't understand the Frate's charity,' said a young man in an excellent cloth tunic, whose face showed no signs of want. 'The Frate

has been preaching to the birds, like Saint Anthony, and he's been telling the hawks they were made to feed the sparrows, as every good Florentine citizen was made to feed six starving beggars from Arezzo or Bologna. Madonna, there, is a pious Piagnone: she's not going to throw away her good bread on honest citizens who've got all the Frate's prophecies to swallow.'

'Come, madonna,' said he of the red cap, 'the old thief doesn't eat the bread, you see: you'd better try us. We fast so much, we're half saints already.'

The circle had narrowed till the coarse men - most of them gaunt from privation - had left hardly any margin round Romola. She had been taking from her basket a small horn-cup, into which she put the piece of bread and just moistened it with wine; and hitherto she had not appeared to heed them. But now she rose to her feet, and looked round at them. Instinctively the men who were nearest to her pushed backward a little, as if their rude nearness were the fault of those behind. Romola held out the basket of bread to the man in the night-cap, looking at him without any reproach in her glance, as she said -

'Hunger is hard to bear, I know, and you have the power to take this bread if you will. It was saved for sick women and children. You are strong men; but if you do not choose to suffer because you are strong, you have the power to take everything from the weak. You can take the bread from this basket; but I shall watch by this old man; I shall resist your taking the bread from him.'

For a few moments there was perfect silence, while Romola looked at the faces before her, and held out the basket of bread. Her own pale face had the slightly pinched look and the deepening of the eye-socket which indicate unusual fasting in the habitually temperate, and the large direct gaze of her hazel eyes was all the more impressive.

The man in the night-cap looked rather silly, and backed, thrusting his elbow into his neighbour's ribs with an air of moral rebuke. The backing was general, every one wishing to imply that he had been pushed forward against his will; and the young man in the fine cloth tunic had disappeared.

But at this moment the armed servitors of the Signoria, who had begun to patrol the line of streets through which the procession was to pass, came up to disperse the group which was obstructing the narrow street. The man addressed as Cecco retreated from a threatening mace up the church steps, and said to Romola, in a respectful tone -

'Madonna, if you want to go on your errands, I'll take care of the old man.'

Cecco was a wild-looking figure: a very ragged tunic, made shaggy and variegated by cloth-dust and clinging fragments of wool, gave relief to a pair of bare bony arms and a long sinewy neck; his square jaw shaded by a bristly black beard, his bridgeless nose and low forehead, made his face look as if it had been crushed down for purposes of packing, and a narrow piece of red rag tied over his ears seemed to assist in the compression. Romola looked at him with some hesitation.

'Don't distrust me, madonna,' said Cecco, who understood her look perfectly; 'I am not so pretty as you, but I've got an old mother who eats my porridge for me. What! there's a heart inside me, and I've bought a candle for the most Holy Virgin before now. Besides, see there, the old fellow is eating his sop. He's hale enough: he'll be on his legs as well as the best of us by-and-by.'

'Thank you for offering to take care of him, friend,' said Romola, rather penitent for her doubting glance. Then leaning to Baldassarre, she said, 'Pray wait for me till I come again.'

He assented with a slight movement of the head and hand, and Romola went on her way towards the hospital of San Matteo, in the Piazza di San Marco.