

Chapter 45 - At the Barber's Shop

After that welcome appearance as the messenger with the olive-branch, which was an unpromised favour of fortune, Tito had other commissions to fulfil of a more premeditated character. He paused at the Palazzo Vecchio, and awaited there the return of the Ten, who managed external and war affairs, that he might duly deliver to them the results of his private mission to Pisa, intended as a preliminary to an avowed embassy of which Bernardo Rucellai was to be the head, with the object of coming, if possible, to a pacific understanding with the Emperor Maximilian and the League.

Tito's talents for diplomatic work had been well ascertained, and as he gave with fulness and precision the results of his inquiries and interviews, Bernardo del Nero, who was at that time one of the Ten, could not withhold his admiration. He would have withheld it if he could; for his original dislike of Tito had returned, and become stronger, since the sale of the library. Romola had never uttered a word to her godfather on the circumstances of the sale, and Bernardo had understood her silence as a prohibition to him to enter on the subject, but he felt sure that the breach of her father's wish had been a blighting grief to her, and the old man's observant eyes discerned other indications that her married life was not happy.

'Ah,' he said, inwardly, 'that doubtless is the reason she has taken to listening to Fra Girolamo, and going amongst the Piagnoni, which I never expected from her. These women, if they are not happy, and have no children, must either take to folly or to some overstrained religion that makes them think they've got all heaven's work on their shoulders. And as for my poor child Romola, it is as I always said - the cramming with Latin and Greek has left her as much a woman as if she had done nothing all day but prick her fingers with the needle. And this husband of hers, who gets employed everywhere, because he's a tool with a smooth handle, I wish Tornabuoni and the rest may not find their fingers cut. Well, well, solco torto, sacco dritto - many a full sack comes from a crooked furrow; and he who will be captain of none but honest men will have small hire to pay.'

With this long-established conviction that there could be no moral sifting of political agents, the old Florentine abstained from all interference in Tito's disfavour. Apart from what must be kept sacred and private for Romola's sake, Bernardo had nothing direct to allege against the useful Greek, except that he was a Greek, and that he, Bernardo, did not like him; for the doubleness of feigning attachment to the popular government, while at heart a Medicean, was common to Tito with more than half the Medicean party. He only feigned with more skill than the rest: that was all. So Bernardo was simply cold to Tito, who returned the coldness with a scrupulous, distant respect.

And it was still the notion in Florence that the old tie between Bernardo and Bardo made any service done to Romola's husband an acceptable homage to her godfather.

After delivering himself of his charge at the Old Palace, Tito felt that the avowed official work of the day was done. He was tired and adust with long riding; but he did not go home. There were certain things in his scarsella and on his mind, from which he wished to free himself as soon as possible, but the opportunities must be found so skilfully that they must not seem to be sought. He walked from the Palazzo in a sauntering fashion towards the Piazza del Duomo. The procession was at an end now, but the bells were still ringing, and the people were moving about the streets restlessly, longing for some more definite vent to their joy. If the Frate could have stood up in the great Piazza and preached to them, they might have been satisfied, but now, in spite of the new discipline which declared Christ to be the special King of the Florentines and required all pleasures to be of a Christian sort, there was a secret longing in many of the youngsters who shouted 'Viva Gesu!' for a little vigorous stone-throwing in sign of thankfulness.

Tito, as he passed along, could not escape being recognised by some as the welcome bearer of the olive-branch, and could only rid himself of an inconvenient ovation, chiefly in the form of eager questions, by telling those who pressed on him that Meo di Sasso, the true messenger from Leghorn, must now be entering, and might certainly be met towards the Porta San Frediano. He could tell much more than Tito knew.

Freeing himself from importunities in this adroit manner, he made his way to the Piazza del Duomo, casting his long eyes round the space with an air of the utmost carelessness, but really seeking to detect some presence which might furnish him with one of his desired opportunities. The fact of the procession having terminated at the Duomo made it probable that there would be more than the usual concentration of loungers and talkers in the Piazza and round Nello's shop. It was as he expected. There was a group leaning against the rails near the north gates of the Baptistery, so exactly what he sought, that he looked more indifferent than ever, and seemed to recognise the tallest member of the group entirely by chance as he had half passed him, just turning his head to give him a slight greeting, while he tossed the end of his becchetto over his left shoulder.

Yet the tall, broad-shouldered personage greeted in that slight way looked like one who had considerable claims. He wore a richly-embroidered tunic, with a great show of linen, after the newest French mode, and at his belt there hung a sword and poniard of fine workmanship. His hat, with a red plume in it, seemed a scornful

protest against the gravity of Florentine costume, which had been exaggerated to the utmost under the influence of the Piagnoni. Certain undefinable indications of youth made the breadth of his face and the large diameter of his waist appear the more emphatically a stamp of coarseness, and his eyes had that rude desecrating stare at all men and things which to a refined mind is as intolerable as a bad odour or a flaring light.

He and his companions, also young men dressed expensively and wearing arms, were exchanging jokes with that sort of ostentatious laughter which implies a desire to prove that the laughter is not mortified though some people might suspect it. There were good reasons for such a suspicion; for this broad-shouldered man with the red feather was Dolfo Spini, leader of the Compagnacci, or Evil Companions - that is to say, of all the dissolute young men belonging to the old aristocratic party, enemies of the Mediceans, enemies of the popular government, but still more bitter enemies of Savonarola. Dolfo Spini, heir of the great house with the loggia, over the bridge of the Santa Trinita, had organised these young men into an armed band, as sworn champions of extravagant suppers and all the pleasant sins of the flesh, against reforming pietists who threatened to make the world chaste and temperate to so intolerable a degree that there would soon be no reason for living, except the extreme unpleasantness of the alternative. Up to this very morning he had been loudly declaring that Florence was given up to famine and ruin entirely through its blind adherence to the advice of the Frate, and that there could be no salvation for Florence but in joining the League and driving the Frate out of the city - sending him to Rome, in fact, whither he ought to have gone long ago in obedience to the summons of the Pope. It was suspected, therefore, that Messer Dolfo Spini's heart was not aglow with pure joy at the unexpected succours which had come in apparent fulfilment of the Frate's prediction, and the laughter, which was ringing out afresh as Tito joined the group at Nello's door, did not serve to dissipate the suspicion. For leaning against the door-post in the centre of the group was a close-shaven, keen-eyed personage, named Niccolo Macchiavelli, who, young as he was, had penetrated all the small secrets of egoism.

'Messer Dolfo's head,' he was saying, 'is more of a pumpkin than I thought. I measure men's dulness by the devices they trust for deceiving others. Your dullest animal of all is he who grins and says he doesn't mind just after he has had his shins kicked. If I were a trifle duller, now,' he went on, smiling as the circle opened to admit Tito, 'I should pretend to be fond of this Melema, who has got a secretaryship that would exactly suit me - as if Latin ill-paid could love better Latin than's better paid! Melema, you are a pestiferously clever fellow, very much in my way, and I'm sorry to hear you've had another piece of good-luck to-day.'

'Questionable luck, Niccolo,' said Tito, touching him on the shoulder in a friendly way; 'I have got nothing by it yet but being laid hold of and breathed upon by wool-beaters, when I am as soiled and battered with riding as a tabellario (letter-carrier) from Bologna.'

'Ah! you want a touch of my art, Messer Oratore,' said Nello, who had come forward at the sound of Tito's voice; 'your chin, I perceive, has yesterday's crop upon it. Come, come - consign yourself to the priest of all the Muses. Sandro, quick with the lather!'

'In truth, Nello, that is just what I most desire at this moment,' said Tito, seating himself; 'and that was why I turned my steps towards thy shop, instead of going home at once, when I had done my business at the Palazzo.'

'Yes, indeed, it is not fitting that you should present yourself to Madonna Romola with a rusty chin and a tangled zazzera. Nothing that is not dainty ought to approach the Florentine lily; though I see her constantly going about like a sunbeam amongst the rags that line our corners - if indeed she is not more like a moonbeam now, for I thought yesterday, when I met her, that she looked as pale and worn as that fainting Madonna of Fra Giovanni's. You must see to it, my bel erudito: she keeps too many fasts and vigils in your absence.'

Tito gave a melancholy shrug. 'It is too true, Nello. She has been depriving herself of half her proper food every day during this famine. But what can I do? Her mind has been set all aflame. A husband's influence is powerless against the Frate's.'

'As every other influence is likely to be, that of the Holy Father included,' said Domenico Cennini, one of the group at the door, who had turned in with Tito. 'I don't know whether you have gathered anything at Pisa about the way the wind sits at Rome, Melema?'

'Secrets of the council chamber, Messer Domenico!' said Tito, smiling and opening his palms in a deprecatory manner. 'An envoy must be as dumb as a father confessor.'

'Certainly, certainly,' said Cennini. 'I ask for no breach of that rule. Well, my belief is, that if his Holiness were to drive Fra Girolamo to extremity, the Frate would move heaven and earth to get a General Council of the Church - ay, and would get it too; and I, for one, should not be sorry, though I'm no Piagnone.'

'With leave of your greater experience, Messer Domenico,' said Macchiavelli, 'I must differ from you - not in your wish to see a General Council which might reform the Church, but in your belief that the Frate will checkmate his Holiness. The Frate's game is an

impossible one. If he had contented himself with preaching against the vices of Rome, and with prophesying that in some way, not mentioned, Italy would be scourged, depend upon it Pope Alexander would have allowed him to spend his breath in that way as long as he could find hearers. Such spiritual blasts as those knock no walls down. But the Frate wants to be something more than a spiritual trumpet: he wants to be a lever, and what is more, he is a lever. He wants to spread the doctrine of Christ by maintaining a popular government in Florence, and the Pope, as I know, on the best authority, has private views to the contrary.'

'Then Florence will stand by the Frate,' Cennini broke in, with some fervour. 'I myself should prefer that he would let his prophesying alone, but if our freedom to choose our own government is to be attacked - I am an obedient son of the Church, but I would vote for resisting Pope Alexander the Sixth, as our forefathers resisted Pope Gregory the Eleventh.'

'But pardon me, Messer Domenico,' said Macchiavelli sticking his thumbs into his belt, and speaking with that cool enjoyment of exposition which surmounts every other force in discussion. 'Have you correctly seized the Frate's position? How is it that he has become a lever, and made himself worth attacking by an acute man like his Holiness? Because he has got the ear of the people: because he gives them threats and promises, which they believe come straight from God, not only about hell, purgatory, and paradise, but about Pisa and our Great Council. But let events go against him, so as to shake the people's faith, and the cause of his power will be the cause of his fall. He is accumulating three sorts of hatred on his head - the hatred of average mankind against every one who wants to lay on them a strict yoke of virtue; the hatred of the stronger powers in Italy who want to farm Florence for their own purposes; and the hatred of the people, to whom he has ventured to promise good in this world, instead of confining his promises to the next. If a prophet is to keep his power, he must be a prophet like Mahomet, with an army at his back, that when the people's faith is fainting it may be frightened into life again.'

'Rather sum up the three sorts of hatred in one,' said Francesco Cei, impetuously, 'and say he has won the hatred of all men who have sense and honesty, by inventing hypocritical lies. His proper place is among the false prophets in the Inferno, who walk with their heads turned hindforemost.'

'You are too angry, my Francesco,' said Macchiavelli, smiling; 'you poets are apt to cut the clouds in your wrath. I am no votary of the Frate's, and would not lay down my little finger for his veracity. But veracity is a plant of paradise, and the seeds have never flourished beyond the walls. You, yourself, my Francesco, tell poetical lies only;

partly compelled by the poet's fervour, partly to please your audience; but you object to lies in prose. Well, the Frate differs from you as to the boundary of poetry, that's all. When he gets into the pulpit of the Duomo, he has the fervour within him, and without him he has the audience to please. Ecco!

'You are somewhat lax there, Niccolo,' said Cennini, gravely. 'I myself believe in the Frate's integrity, though I don't believe in his prophecies, and as long as his integrity is not disproved, we have a popular party strong enough to protect him and resist foreign interference.'

'A party that seems strong enough,' said Macchiavelli, with a shrug, and an almost imperceptible glance towards Tito, who was abandoning himself with much enjoyment to Nello's combing and scenting. 'But how many Mediceans are there among you? How many who will not be turned round by a private grudge?'

'As to the Mediceans,' said Cennini, 'I believe there is very little genuine feeling left on behalf of the Medici. Who would risk much for Piero de' Medici? A few old staunch friends, perhaps, like Bernardo del Nero; but even some of those most connected with the family are hearty friends of the popular government, and would exert themselves for the Frate. I was talking to Giannozzo Pucci only a little while ago, and I am convinced there's nothing he would set his face against more than against any attempt to alter the new order of things.'

'You are right there, Messer Domenico,' said Tito, with a laughing meaning in his eyes, as he rose from the shaving-chair; 'and I fancy the tender passion came in aid of hard theory there. I am persuaded there was some jealousy at the bottom of Giannozzo's alienation from Piero de' Medici; else so amiable a creature as he would never feel the bitterness he sometimes allows to escape him in that quarter. He was in the procession with you, I suppose?'

'No,' said Cennini; 'he is at his villa - went there three days ago.'

Tito was settling his cap and glancing down at his splashed hose as if he hardly heeded the answer. In reality he had obtained a much-desired piece of information. He had at that moment in his scarsella a crushed gold ring which he had engaged to deliver to Giannozzo Pucci. He had received it from an envoy of Piero de' Medici, whom he had ridden out of his way to meet at Certaldo on the Siena road. Since Pucci was not in the town, he would send the ring by Fra Michele, a Carthusian lay Brother in the service of the Mediceans, and the receipt of that sign would bring Pucci back to hear the verbal part of Tito's mission.

'Behold him!' said Nello, flourishing his comb and pointing it at Tito, 'the handsomest scholar in the world or in the wolds, now he has passed through my hands! A trifle thinner in the face, though, than when he came in his first bloom to Florence - eh? and, I vow, there are some lines just faintly hinting themselves about your mouth, Messer Oratore! Ah, mind is an enemy to beauty! I myself was thought beautiful by the women at one time - when I was in my swaddling-bands. But now - oime! I carry my unwritten poems in cipher on my face!'

Tito, laughing with the rest as Nello looked at himself tragically in the hand-mirror, made a sign of farewell to the company generally, and took his departure.

'I'm of our old Piero di Cosimo's mind,' said Francesco Cei. 'I don't half like Melema. That trick of smiling gets stronger than ever - no wonder he has lines about the mouth.'

'He's too successful,' said Macchiavelli, playfully. 'I'm sure there's something wrong about him, else he wouldn't have that secretaryship.'

'He's an able nan,' said Cennini, in a tone of judicial fairness. 'I and my brother have always found him useful with our Greek sheets, and he gives great satisfaction to the Ten. I like to see a young man work his way upward by merit. And the secretary Scala, who befriended him from the first, thinks highly of him still, I know.'

'Doubtless,' said a notary in the background. 'He writes Scala's official letters for him, or corrects them, and gets well paid for it too.'

'I wish Messer Bartolommeo would pay me to doctor his gouty Latin,' said Macchiavelli, with a shrug 'Did he tell you about the pay, Ser Ceccone, or was it Melema himself?' he added, looking at the notary with a face ironically innocent.

'Melema? no, indeed,' answered Ser Ceccone. 'He is as close as a nut. He never brags. That's why he's employed everywhere. They say he's getting rich with doing all sorts of underhand work.'

'It is a little too bad,' said Macchiavelli, 'and so many able notaries out of employment!'

'Well, I must say I thought that was a nasty story a year or two ago about the man who said he had stolen jewels,' said Cei. 'It got hushed up somehow; but I remember Piero di Cosimo said, at the time, he believed there was something in it, for he saw Melema's face when the man laid hold of him, and he never saw a visage so 'painted with fear,' as our sour old Dante says.'

'Come, spit no more of that venom, Francesco,' said Nello, getting indignant, 'else I shall consider it a public duty to cut your hair awry the next time I get you under my scissors. That story of the stolen jewels was a lie. Bernardo Rucellai and the Magnificent Eight knew all about it. The man was a dangerous madman, and he was very properly kept out of mischief in prison. As for our Piero di Cosimo, his wits are running after the wind of Mongibello: he has such an extravagant fancy that he would take a lizard for a crocodile. No: that story has been dead and buried too long - our noses object to it.'

'It is true,' said Macchiavelli. 'You forget the danger of the precedent, Francesco. The next mad beggarman may accuse you of stealing his verses, or me, God help me! of stealing his coppers. Ah!' he went on, turning towards the door, 'Dolfo Spini has carried his red feather out of the Piazza. That captain of swaggerers would like the Republic to lose Pisa just for the chance of seeing the people tear the frock off the Frate's back. With your pardon, Francesco - I know he is a friend of yours - there are few things I should like better than to see him play the part of Capo d'Oca, who went out to the tournament blowing his trumpets and returned with them in a bag.'