

Chapter 46 - By a Street Lamp

That evening, when it was dark and threatening rain, Romola, returning with Maso and the lantern by her side, from the hospital of San Matteo, which she had visited after vespers, encountered her husband just issuing from the monastery of San Marco. Tito, who had gone out again shortly after his arrival in the Via de' Bardi, and had seen little of Romola during the day, immediately proposed to accompany her home, dismissing Maso, whose short steps annoyed him. It was only usual for him to pay her such an official attention when it was obviously demanded from him. Tito and Romola never jarred, never remonstrated with each other. They were too hopelessly alienated in their inner life ever to have that contest which is an effort towards agreement. They talked of all affairs, public and private, with careful adherence to an adopted course. If Tito wanted a supper prepared in the old library, now pleasantly furnished as a banqueting-room, Romola assented, and saw that everything needful was done: and Tito, on his side, left her entirely uncontrolled in her daily habits, accepting the help she offered him in transcribing or making digests, and in return meeting her conjectured want of supplies for her charities. Yet he constantly, as on this very morning, avoided exchanging glances with her; affected to believe that she was out of the house, in order to avoid seeking her in her own room; and playfully attributed to her a perpetual preference of solitude to his society.

In the first ardour of her self-conquest, after she had renounced her resolution of flight, Romola had made many timid efforts towards the return of a frank relation between them. But to her such a relation could only come by open speech about their differences, and the attempt to arrive at a moral understanding; while Tito could only be saved from alienation from her by such a recovery of her effusive tenderness as would have presupposed oblivion of their differences. He cared for no explanation between them; he felt any thorough explanation impossible: he would have cared to have Romola fond again, and to her, fondness was impossible. She could be submissive and gentle, she could repress any sign of repulsion; but tenderness was not to be feigned. She was helplessly conscious of the result: her husband was alienated from her.

It was an additional reason why she should be carefully kept outside of secrets which he would in no case have chosen to communicate to her. With regard to his political action he sought to convince her that he considered the cause of the Medici hopeless; and that on that practical ground, as well as in theory, he heartily served the popular government in which she had now a warm interest. But impressions subtle as odours made her uneasy about his relations with San Marco. She was painfully divided between the dread of seeing any

evidence to arouse her suspicions, and the impulse to watch lest any harm should come that she might have arrested.

As they walked together this evening, Tito said - 'The business of the day is not yet quite ended for me. I shall conduct you to our door, my Romola, and then I must fulfil another commission, which will take me an hour, perhaps, before I can return and rest, as I very much need to do.'

And then he talked amusingly of what he had seen at Pisa, until they were close upon a loggia, near which there hung a lamp before a picture of the Virgin. The street was a quiet one, and hitherto they had passed few people; but now there was a sound of many approaching footsteps and confused voices.

'We shall not get home without a wetting, unless we take shelter under this convenient loggia,' Tito said, hastily, hurrying Romola, with a slightly startled movement, up the step of the loggia.

'Surely it is useless to wait for this small drizzling rain,' said Romola, in surprise.

'No: I felt it becoming heavier. Let us wait a little.' With that wakefulness to the faintest indication which belongs to a mind habitually in a state of caution, Tito had detected by the glimmer of the lamp that the leader of the advancing group wore a red feather and a glittering sword-hilt - in fact, was almost the last person in the world he would have chosen to meet at this hour with Romola by his side. He had already during the day had one momentous interview with Dolfo Spini, and the business he had spoken of to Romola as yet to be done was a second interview with that personage, a sequence of the visit he had paid at San Marco. Tito, by a long-preconcerted plan, had been the bearer of letters to Savonarola - carefully-forged letters; one of them, by a stratagem, bearing the very signature and seal of the Cardinal of Naples, who of all the Sacred College had most exerted his influence at Rome in favour of the Frate. The purport of the letters was to state that the Cardinal was on his progress from Pisa, and, unwilling for strong reasons to enter Florence, yet desirous of taking counsel with Savonarola at this difficult juncture, intended to pause this very day at San Casciano, about ten miles from the city, whence he would ride out the next morning in the plain garb of a priest, and meet Savonarola, as if casually, five miles on the Florence road, two hours after sunrise. The plot, of which these forged letters were the initial step, was that Dolfo Spini with a band of his Compagnacci was to be posted in ambush on the road, at a lonely spot about five miles from the gates; that he was to seize Savonarola with the Dominican brother who would accompany him according to rule, and deliver him

over to a small detachment of Milanese horse in readiness near San Casciano, by whom he was to be carried into the Roman territory.

There was a strong chance that the penetrating Frate would suspect a trap, and decline to incur the risk, which he had for some time avoided, of going beyond the city walls. Even when he had preached, his friends held it necessary that he should be attended by an armed guard; and here he was called on to commit himself to a solitary road, with no other attendant than a fellow-monk. On this ground the minimum of time had been given him for decision, and the chance in favour of his acting on the letters was, that the eagerness with which his mind was set on the combining of interests within and without the Church towards the procuring of a General Council, and also the expectation of immediate service from the Cardinal in the actual juncture of his contest with the Pope, would triumph over his shrewdness and caution in the brief space allowed for deliberation.

Tito had had an audience of Savonarola, having declined to put the letters into any hands but his, and with consummate art had admitted that incidentally, and by inference, he was able so far to conjecture their purport as to believe they referred to a rendezvous outside the gates, in which case he urged that the Frate should seek an armed guard from the Signoria, and offered his services in carrying the request with the utmost privacy. Savonarola had replied briefly that this was impossible: an armed guard was incompatible with privacy. He spoke with a flashing eye, and Tito felt convinced that he meant to incur the risk.

Tito himself did not much care for the result. He managed his affairs so cleverly, that all results, he considered, must turn to his advantage. Whichever party came uppermost, he was secure of favour and money. That is an indecorously naked statement; the fact, clothed as Tito habitually clothed it, was that his acute mind, discerning the equal hollowness of all parties, took the only rational course in making them subservient to his own interest.

If Savonarola fell into the snare, there were diamonds in question and papal patronage; if not, Tito's adroit agency had strengthened his position with Savonarola and with Spini, while any confidences he obtained from them made him the more valuable as an agent of the Mediceans.

But Spini was an inconvenient colleague. He had cunning enough to delight in plots, but not the ability or self-command necessary to so complex an effect as secrecy. He frequently got excited with drinking, for even sober Florence had its 'Beoni,' or toppers, both lay and clerical, who became loud at taverns and private banquets; and in spite of the agreement between him and Tito, that their public recognition of each

other should invariably be of the coolest sort, there was always the possibility that on an evening encounter he would be suddenly blurring and affectionate. The delicate sign of casting the becchetto over the left shoulder was understood in the morning, but the strongest hint short of a threat might not suffice to keep off a fraternal grasp of the shoulder in the evening.

Tito's chief hope now was that Dolfo Spini had not caught sight of him, and the hope would have been well founded if Spini had had no clearer view of him than he had caught of Spini. But, himself in shadow, he had seen Tito illuminated for an instant by the direct rays of the lamp, and Tito in his way was as strongly marked a personage as the captain of the Compagnacci. Romola's black-shrouded figure had escaped notice, and she now stood behind her husband's shoulder in the corner of the loggia. Tito was not left to hope long.

'Ha! my carrier-pigeon!' grated Spini's harsh voice, in what he meant to be an undertone, while his hand grasped Tito's shoulder; 'what did you run into hiding for? You didn't know it was comrades who were coming. It's well I caught sight of you; it saves time. What of the chase tomorrow morning? Will the bald-headed game rise? Are the falcons to be got ready?'

If it had been in Tito's nature to feel an access of rage, he would have felt it against this bull-faced accomplice, unfit either for a leader or a tool. His lips turned white, but his excitement came from the pressing difficulty of choosing a safe device. If he attempted to hush Spini, that would only deepen Romola's suspicion, and he knew her well enough to know that if some strong alarm were roused in her, she was neither to be silenced nor hoodwinked: on the other hand, if he repelled Spini angrily the wine-breathing Compagnaccio might become savage, being more ready at resentment than at the divination of motives. He adopted a third course, which proved that Romola retained one sort of power over him - the power of dread.

He pressed her hand, as if intending a hint to her, and said in a good-humoured tone of comradeship -

'Yes, my Dolfo, you may prepare in all security. But take no trumpets with you.'

'Don't be afraid,' said Spini, a little piqued. 'No need to play Ser Saccante with me. I know where the devil keeps his tail as well as you do. What! he swallowed the bait whole? The prophetic nose didn't scent the hook at all?' he went on, lowering his tone a little, with a blundering sense of secrecy.

'The brute will not be satisfied till he has emptied the bag,' thought Tito: but aloud he said, - 'Swallowed all as easily as you swallow a cup of Trebbiano. Ha! I see torches: there must be a dead body coming. The pestilence has been spreading, I hear.'

'Santiddio! I hate the sight of those biers. Good night,' said Spini, hastily moving off.

The torches were really coming, but they preceded a church dignitary who was returning homeward; the suggestion of the dead body and the pestilence was Tito's device for getting rid of Spini without telling him to go. The moment he had moved away, Tito turned to Romola, and said, quietly -

'Do not be alarmed by anything that bestia has said, my Romola. We will go on now: I think the rain has not increased.'

She was quivering with indignant resolution; it was of no use for Tito to speak in that unconcerned way. She distrusted every word he could utter.

'I will not go on,' she said. 'I will not move nearer home until I have some security against this treachery being perpetrated.'

'Wait, at least, until these torches have passed,' said Tito, with perfect self-command, but with a new rising of dislike to a wife who this time, he foresaw, might have the power of thwarting him in spite of the husband's predominance.

The torches passed, with the Vicario dell' Arcivescovo, and due reverence was done by Tito, but Romola saw nothing outward. If for the defeat of this treachery, in which she believed with all the force of long presentiment, it had been necessary at that moment for her to spring on her husband and hurl herself with him down a precipice, she felt as if she could have done it. Union with this man! At that moment the self-quelling discipline of two years seemed to be nullified: she felt nothing but that they were divided.

They were nearly in darkness again, and could only see each other's faces dimly.

'Tell me the truth, Tito - this time tell me the truth,' said Romola, in a low quivering voice. 'It will be safer for you.'

'Why should I desire to tell you anything else, my angry saint?' said Tito, with a slight touch of contempt, which was the vent of his annoyance; 'since the truth is precisely that over which you have most

reason to rejoice - namely, that my knowing a plot of Spini's enables me to secure the Frate from falling a victim to it.'

'What is the plot?'

'That I decline to tell,' said Tito. 'It is enough that the Frate's safety will be secured.'

'It is a plot for drawing him outside the gates that Spini may murder him.'

'There has been no intention of murder. It is simply a plot for compelling him to obey the Pope's summons to Rome. But as I serve the popular government, and think the Frate's presence here is a necessary means of maintaining it at present, I choose to prevent his departure. You may go to sleep with entire ease of mind to-night.'

For a moment Romola was silent. Then she said, in a voice of anguish, 'Tito, it is of no use: I have no belief in you.'

She could just discern his action as he shrugged his shoulders, and spread out his palms in silence. That cold dislike which is the anger of unimpassioned beings was hardening within him.

'If the Frate leaves the city - if any harm happens to him,' said Romola, after a slight pause, in a new tone of indignant resolution, - 'I will declare what I have heard to the Signoria, and you will be disgraced. What if I am your wife?' she went on, impetuously; 'I will be disgraced with you. If we are united. I am that part of you that will save you from crime. Others shall not be betrayed.'

'I am quite aware of what you would be likely to do, anima mia,' said Tito, in the coolest of his liquid tones; 'therefore if you have a small amount of reasoning at your disposal just now, consider that if you believe me in nothing else, you may believe me when I say I will take care of myself, and not put it in your power to ruin me.'

'Then you assure me that the Frate is warned - he will not go beyond the gates?'

'He shall not go beyond the gates.'

There was a moment's pause, but distrust was not to be expelled.

'I will go back to San Marco now and find out,' Romola said, making a movement forward.

'You shall not!' said Tito, in a bitter whisper, seizing her wrists with all his masculine force. 'I am master of you. You shall not set yourself in opposition to me.'

There were passers-by approaching. Tito had heard them, and that was why he spoke in a whisper. Romola was too conscious of being mastered to have struggled, even if she had remained unconscious that witnesses were at hand. But she was aware now of footsteps and voices, and her habitual sense of personal dignity made her at once yield to Tito's movement towards leading her from the loggia.

They walked on in silence for some time, under the small drizzling rain. The first rush of indignation and alarm in Romola had begun to give way to more complicated feelings, which rendered speech and action difficult. In that simpler state of vehemence, open opposition to the husband from whom she felt her soul revolting had had the aspect of temptation for her; it seemed the easiest of all courses. But now, habits of self-questioning, memories of impulse subdued, and that proud reserve which all discipline had left unmodified, began to emerge from the flood of passion. The grasp of her wrists, which asserted her husband's physical predominance, instead of arousing a new fierceness in her as it might have done if her impetuosity had been of a more vulgar kind, had given her a momentary shuddering horror at this form of contest with him. It was the first time they had been in declared hostility to each other since her flight and return, and the check given to her ardent resolution then, retained the power to arrest her now. In this altered condition her mind began to dwell on the probabilities that would save her from any desperate course: Tito would not risk betrayal by her; whatever had been his original intention, he must be determined now by the fact that she knew of the plot. She was not bound now to do anything else than to hang over him that certainty, that if he deceived her, her lips would not be closed. And then, it was possible - yes, she must cling to that possibility till it was disproved - that Tito had never meant to aid in the betrayal of the Frate.

Tito, on his side, was busy with thoughts, and did not speak again till they were near home. Then he said -

'Well, Romola, have you now had time to recover calmness? If so, you can supply your want of belief in me by a little rational inference: you can see, I presume, that if I had had any intention of furthering Spini's plot, I should now be aware that the possession of a fair Piagnone for my wife, who knows the secret of the plot, would be a serious obstacle in my way.'

Tito assumed the tone which was just then the easiest to him, conjecturing that in Romola's present mood persuasive deprecation would be lost upon her.

'Yes, Tito,' she said, in a low voice, 'I think you believe that I would guard the Republic from further treachery. You are right to believe it: if the Frate is betrayed, I will denounce you.' She paused a moment, and then said, with an effort, 'But it was not so. I have perhaps spoken too hastily - you never meant it. Only, why will you seem to be that man's comrade?'

'Such relations are inevitable to practical men, my Romola,' said Tito, gratified by discerning the struggle within her. 'You fair creatures live in the clouds. Pray go to rest with an easy heart,' he added, opening the door for her.