

Chapter 48 - Counter-check

It was late in the afternoon when Tito returned home. Romola, seated opposite the cabinet in her narrow room, copying documents, was about to desist from her work because the light was getting dim, when her husband entered. He had come straight to this room to seek her, with a thoroughly defined intention, and there was something new to Romola in his manner and expression as he looked at her silently on entering, and, without taking off his cap and mantle, leaned one elbow on the cabinet, and stood directly in front of her.

Romola, fully assured alluring the day of the Frate's safety, was feeling the reaction of some penitence for the access of distrust and indignation which had impelled her to address her husband publicly on a matter that she knew he wished to be private. She told herself that she had probably been wrong. The scheming duplicity which she had heard even her godfather allude to as inseparable from party tactics might be sufficient to account for the connection with Spini, without the supposition that Tito had ever meant to further the plot. She wanted to atone for her impetuosity by confessing that she had been too hasty, and for some hours her mind had been dwelling on the possibility that this confession of hers might lead to other frank words breaking the two years' silence of their hearts. The silence had been so complete, that Tito was ignorant of her having fled from him and come back again; they had never approached an avowal of that past which, both in its young love and in the shock that shattered the love, lay locked away from them like a banquet-room where death had once broken the feast.

She looked up at him with that submission in her glance which belonged to her state of self-reproof; but the subtle change in his face and manner arrested her speech. For a few moments they remained silent, looking at each other.

Tito himself felt that a crisis was come in his married life. The husband's determination to mastery, which lay deep below all blandness and beseechingness, had risen permanently to the surface now, and seemed to alter his face, as a face is altered by a hidden muscular tension with which a man is secretly throttling or stamping out the life from something feeble, yet dangerous.

'Romola,' he began, in the cool liquid tone that made her shiver, 'it is time that we should understand each other.' He paused.

'That is what I most desire, Tito,' she said, faintly. Her sweet pale face, with all its anger gone and nothing but the timidity of self-doubt in it, seemed to give a marked predominance to her husband's dark strength.

'You took a step this morning,' Tito went on, 'which you must now yourself perceive to have been useless - which exposed you to remark and may involve me in serious practical difficulties.'

'I acknowledge that I was too hasty; I am sorry for any injustice I may have done you.' Romola spoke these words in a fuller and firmer tone; Tito, she hoped, would look less hard when she expressed her regret, and then she could say other things.

'I wish you once for all to understand,' he said, without any change of voice, 'that such collisions are incompatible with our position as husband and wife. I wish you to reflect on the mode in which you were led to that step, that the process may not be repeated.'

'That depends chiefly on you, Tito,' said Romola, taking fire slightly. It was not at all what she had thought of saying, but we see a very little way before us in mutual speech.

'You would say, I suppose,' answered Tito, 'that nothing is to occur in future which can excite your unreasonable suspicions. You were frank enough to say last night that you have no belief in me. I am not surprised at any exaggerated conclusion you may draw from slight premises, but I wish to point out to you what is likely to be the fruit of your making such exaggerated conclusions a ground for interfering in affairs of which you are ignorant. Your attention is thoroughly awake to what I am saying?'

He paused for a reply.

'Yes,' said Romola, flushing in irrepressible resentment at this cold tone of superiority.

'Well, then, it may possibly not be very long before some other chance words or incidents set your imagination at work devising crimes for me, and you may perhaps rush to the Palazzo Vecchio to alarm the Signoria and set the city in an uproar. Shall I tell you what may be the result? Not simply the disgrace of your husband, to which you look forward with so much courage, but the arrest and ruin of many among the chief men in Florence, including Messer Bernardo del Nero.'

Tito had meditated a decisive move, and he had made it. The flush died out of Romola's face, and her very lips were pale - an unusual effect with her, for she was little subject to fear. Tito perceived his success.

'You would perhaps flatter yourself,' he went on, 'that you were performing a heroic deed of deliverance; you might as well try to turn

locks with fine words as apply such notions to the politics of Florence. The question now is, not whether you can have any belief in me, but whether, now you have been warned, you will dare to rush, like a blind man with a torch in his hand, amongst intricate affairs of which you know nothing.'

Romola felt as if her mind were held in a vice by Tito's: the possibilities he had indicated were rising before her with terrible clearness.

'I am too rash,' she said. 'I will try not to be rash.'

'Remember,' said Tito, with unsparing insistence, 'that your act of distrust towards me this morning might, for aught you knew, have had more fatal effects than that sacrifice of your husband which you have learned to contemplate without flinching.'

'Tito, it is not so,' Romola burst forth in a pleading tone, rising and going nearer to him, with a desperate resolution to speak out. 'It is false that I would willingly sacrifice you. It has been the greatest effort of my life to cling to you. I went away in my anger two years ago, and I came back again because I was more bound to you than to anything else on earth. But it is useless. You shut me out from your mind. You affect to think of me as a being too unreasonable to share in the knowledge of your affairs. You will be open with me about nothing.'

She looked like his good angel pleading with him, as she bent her face towards him with dilated eyes, and laid her hand upon his arm. But Romola's touch and glance no longer stirred any fibre of tenderness in her husband. The good-humoured, tolerant Tito, incapable of hatred, incapable almost of impatience, disposed always to be gentle towards the rest of the world, felt himself becoming strangely hard towards this wife whose presence had once been the strongest influence he had known. With all his softness of disposition, he had a masculine effectiveness of intellect and purpose which, like sharpness of edge, is itself an energy, working its way without any strong momentum. Romola had an energy of her own which thwarted his, and no man, who is not exceptionally feeble, will endure being thwarted by his wife. Marriage must be a relation either of sympathy or of conquest.

No emotion darted across his face as he heard Romola for the first time speak of having gone away from him. His lips only looked a little harder as he smiled slightly and said -

'My Romola, when certain conditions are ascertained, we must make up our minds to them. No amount of wishing will fill the Arno, as your people say, or turn a plum into an orange. I have not observed even that prayers have much efficacy that way. You are so constituted as to

have certain strong impressions inaccessible to reason: I cannot share those impressions, and you have withdrawn all trust from me in consequence. You have changed towards me; it has followed that I have changed towards you. It is useless to take any retrospect. We have simply to adapt ourselves to altered conditions.'

'Tito, it would not be useless for us to speak openly,' said Romola, with the sort of exasperation that comes from using living muscle against some lifeless insurmountable resistance. 'It was the sense of deception in you that changed me, and that has kept us apart. And it is not true that I changed first. You changed towards me the night you first wore that chain-armor. You had some secret from me - it was about that old man - and I saw him again yesterday. Tito,' she went on, in a tone of agonised entreaty, 'if you would once tell me everything, let it be what it may - I would not mind pain - that there might be no wall between us! Is it not possible that we could begin a new life?'

This time there was a flash of emotion across Tito's face. He stood perfectly still; but the flash seemed to have whitened him. He took no notice of Romola's appeal, but after a moment's pause, said quietly -

'Your impetuosity about trifles, Romola, has a freezing influence that would cool the baths of Nero.' At these cutting words, Romola shrank and drew herself up into her usual self-sustained attitude. Tito went on. 'If by 'that old man' you mean the mad Jacopo di Nola who attempted my life and made a strange accusation against me, of which I told you nothing because it would have alarmed you to no purpose, he, poor wretch, has died in prison. I saw his name in the list of dead.'

'I know nothing about his accusation,' said Romola. 'But I know he is the man whom I saw with the rope round his neck in the Duomo - the man whose portrait Piero di Cosimo painted, grasping your arm as he saw him grasp it the day the French entered, the day you first wore the armor.'

'And where is he now, pray?' said Tito, still pale, but governing himself.

'He was lying lifeless in the street from starvation,' said Romola. 'I revived him with bread and wine. I brought him to our door, but he refused to come in. Then I gave him some money, and he went away without telling me anything. But he had found out that I was your wife. Who is he?'

'A man, half mad, half imbecile, who was once my father's servant in Greece, and who has a rancorous hatred towards me because I got him dismissed for theft. Now you have the whole mystery, and the

further satisfaction of knowing that I am again in danger of assassination. The fact of my wearing the armour, about which you seem to have thought so much, must have led you to infer that I was in danger from this man. Was that the reason you chose to cultivate his acquaintance and invite him into the house?'

Romola was mute. To speak was only like rushing with bare breast against a shield.

Tito moved from his leaning posture, slowly took off his cap and mantle, and pushed back his hair. He was collecting himself for some final words. And Romola stood upright looking at him as she might have looked at some on-coming deadly force, to be met only by silent endurance.

'We need not refer to these matters again, Romola,' he said, precisely in the same tone as that in which he had spoken at first. 'It is enough if you will remember that the next time your generous ardour leads you to interfere in political affairs, you are likely, not to save any one from danger, but to be raising scaffolds and setting houses on fire. You are not yet a sufficiently ardent Piagnone to believe that Messer Bernardo del Nero is the prince of darkness, and Messer Francesco Valori the archangel Michael. I think I need demand no promise from you?'

'I have understood you too well, Tito.'

'It is enough,' he said, leaving the room.

Romola turned round with despair in her face and sank into her seat. 'O God, I have tried - I cannot help it. We shall always be divided.' Those words passed silently through her mind. 'Unless,' she said aloud, as if some sudden vision had startled her into speech - 'unless misery should come and join us!'

Tito, too, had a new thought in his mind after he had closed the door behind him. With the project of leaving Florence as soon as his life there had become a high enough stepping-stone to a life elsewhere, perhaps at Rome or Milan, there was now for the first time associated a desire to be free from Romola, and to leave her behind him. She had ceased to belong to the desirable furniture of his life: there was no possibility of an easy relation between them without genuineness on his part. Genuineness implied confession of the past, and confession involved a change of purpose. But Tito had as little bent that way as a leopard has to lap milk when its teeth are grown. From all relations that were not easy and agreeable, we know that Tito shrank: why should he cling to them?

And Romola had made his relations difficult with others besides herself. He had had a troublesome interview with Dolfo Spini, who had come back in a rage after an ineffectual soaking with rain and long waiting in ambush, and that scene between Romola and himself at Nello's door, once reported in Spini's ear, might be a seed of something more unmanageable than suspicion. But now, at least, he believed that he had mastered Romola by a terror which appealed to the strongest forces of her nature. He had alarmed her affection and her conscience by the shadowy image of consequences; he had arrested her intellect by hanging before it the idea of a hopeless complexity in affairs which defied any moral judgment.

Yet Tito was not at ease. The world was not yet quite cushioned with velvet, and, if it had been, he could not have abandoned himself to that softness with thorough enjoyment; for before he went out again this evening he put on his coat of chain-armour.