

Chapter 51 - Monna Brigida's Conversion

When Romola said that some one else expected her, she meant her cousin Brigida, but she was far from suspecting how much that good kinswoman was in need of her. Returning together towards the Piazza, they had descried the company of youths coming to a stand before Tessa, and when Romola, having approached near enough to see the simple little contadina's distress, said, 'Wait for me a moment, cousin,' Monna Brigida said hastily, 'Ah, I will not go on: come for me to Boni's shop, - I shall go back there.'

The truth was, Monna Brigida had a consciousness on the one hand of certain 'vanities' carried on her person, and on the other of a growing alarm lest the Piagnoni should be right in holding that rouge, and false hair, and pearl embroidery, endamaged the soul. Their serious view of things filled the air like an odour; nothing seemed to have exactly the same flavour as it used to have; and there was the dear child Romola, in her youth and beauty, leading a life that was uncomfortably suggestive of rigorous demands on woman. A widow at fifty-five whose satisfaction has been largely drawn from what she thinks of her own person, and what she believes others think of it, requires a great fund of imagination to keep her spirits buoyant. And Monna Brigida had begun to have frequent struggles at her toilet. If her soul would prosper better without them, was it really worth while to put on the rouge and the braids? But when she lifted up the hand-mirror and saw a sallow face with baggy cheeks, and crows'-feet that were not to be dissimulated by any simpering of the lips - when she parted her grey hair, and let it lie in simple Piagnone fashion round her face, her courage failed. Monna Berta would certainly burst out laughing at her, and call her an old hag, and as Monna Berta was really only fifty-two, she had a superiority which would make the observation cutting. Every woman who was not a Piagnone would give a shrug at the sight of her, and the men would accost her as if she were their grandmother. Whereas, at fifty-five a woman was not so very old - she only required making up a little. So the rouge and the braids and the embroidered berretta went on again, and Monna Brigida was satisfied with the accustomed effect; as for her neck, if she covered it up, people might suppose it was too old to show, and, on the contrary, with the necklaces round it, it looked better than Monna Berta's. This very day, when she was preparing for the Piagnone Carnival, such a struggle had occurred, and the conflicting fears and longings which caused the struggle, caused her to turn back and seek refuge in the druggist's shop rather than encounter the collectors of the Anathema when Romola was not by her side. But Monna Brigida was not quite rapid enough in her retreat. She had been descried, even before she turned away, by the white-robed boys in the rear of those who wheeled round towards Tessa, and the willingness with which Tessa was given up was, perhaps, slightly due

to the fact that part of the troop had already accosted a personage carrying more markedly upon her the dangerous weight of the Anathema. It happened that several of this troop were at the youngest age taken into peculiar training; and a small fellow of ten, his olive wreath resting above cherubic cheeks and wide brown eyes, his imagination really possessed with a hovering awe at existence as something in which great consequences impended on being good or bad, his longings nevertheless running in the direction of mastery and mischief, was the first to reach Monna Brigida and place himself across her path. She felt angry, and looked for an open door, but there was not one at hand, and by attempting to escape now, she would only make things worse. But it was not the cherubic-faced young one who first addressed her; it was a youth of fifteen, who held one handle of a wide basket.

'Venerable mother!' he began, 'the blessed Jesus commands you to give up the Anathema which you carry upon you. That cap embroidered with pearls, those jewels that fasten up your false hair - let them be given up and sold for the poor; and cast the hair itself away from you, as a lie that is only fit for burning. Doubtless, too, you have other jewels under your silk mantle.'

'Yes, lady,' said the youth at the other handle, who had many of Fra Girolamo's phrases by heart, 'they are too heavy for you: they are heavier than a millstone, and are weighting you for perdition. Will you adorn yourself with the hunger of the poor, and be proud to carry God's curse upon your head?'

'In truth you are old, buona madre,' said the cherubic boy, in a sweet soprano. 'You look very ugly with the red on your cheeks and that black glistening hair, and those fine things. It is only Satan who can like to see you. Your Angel is sorry. He wants you to rub away the red.'

The little fellow snatched a soft silk scarf from the basket, and held it towards Monna Brigida, that she might use it as her guardian angel desired. Her anger and mortification were fast giving way to spiritual alarm. Monna Berta and that cloud of witnesses, highly-dressed society in general, were not looking at her, and she was surrounded by young monitors, whose white robes, and wreaths, and red crosses, and dreadful candour, had something awful in their unusualness. Her Franciscan confessor, Fra Cristoforo, of Santa Croce, was not at hand to reinforce her distrust of Dominican teaching, and she was helplessly possessed and shaken by a vague sense that a supreme warning was come to her. Unvisited by the least suggestion of any other course that was open to her, she took the scarf that was held out, and rubbed her cheeks, with trembling submissiveness.

'It is well, madonna,' said the second youth. 'It is a holy beginning. And when you have taken those vanities from your head, the dew of heavenly grace will descend on it.' The infusion of mischief was getting stronger, and putting his hand to one of the jewelled pins that fastened her braids to the berretta, he drew it out. The heavy black plait fell down over Monna Brigida's face, and dragged the rest of the head-gear forward. It was a new reason for not hesitating: she put up her hands hastily, undid the other fastenings, and hung down into the basket of doom her beloved crimson-velvet berretta, with all its unsurpassed embroidery of seed-pearls, and stood an unrouged woman, with grey hair pushed backward from a face where certain deep lines of age had triumphed over embonpoint.

But the berretta was not allowed to lie in the basket. With impish zeal the youngsters lifted it, and held it up pitilessly, with the false hair dangling.

'See, venerable mother,' said the taller youth, 'what ugly lies you have delivered yourself from! And now you look like the blessed Saint Anna, the mother of the Holy Virgin.'

Thoughts of going into a convent forthwith, and never showing herself in the world again, were rushing through Monna Brigida's mind. There was nothing possible for her but to take care of her soul. Of course, there were spectators laughing: she had no need to look round to assure herself of that. Well! it would, perhaps, be better to be forced to think more of Paradise. But at the thought that the dear accustomed world was no longer in her choice, there gathered some of those hard tears which just moisten elderly eyes, and she could see but dimly a large rough hand holding a red cross, which was suddenly thrust before her over the shoulders of the boys, while a strong guttural voice said -

'Only four quattrini, madonna, blessing and all! Buy it. You'll find a comfort in it now your wig's gone. Deh! what are we sinners doing all our lives? Making soup in a basket, and getting nothing but the scum for our stomachs. Better buy a blessing, madonna! Only four quattrini; the profit is not so much as the smell of a danaro, and it goes to the poor.'

Monna Brigida, in dim-eyed confusion, was proceeding to the further submission of reaching money from her embroidered scarsella, at present hidden by her silk mantle, when the group round her, which she had not yet entertained the idea of escaping, opened before a figure as welcome as an angel loosing prison-bolts.

'Romola, look at me!' said Monna Brigida, in a piteous tone, putting out both her hands.

The white troop was already moving away, with a slight consciousness that its zeal about the headgear had been superabundant enough to afford a dispensation from any further demand for penitential offerings.

'Dear cousin, don't be distressed,' said Romola, smitten with pity, yet hardly able to help smiling at the sudden apparition of her kinswoman in a genuine, natural guise, strangely contrasted with all memories of her. She took the black drapery from her own head, and threw it over Monna Brigida's. 'There,' she went on soothingly, 'no one will remark you now. We will turn down the Via del Palagio and go straight to our house.'

They hastened away, Monna Brigida grasping Romola's hand tightly, as if to get a stronger assurance of her being actually there.

'Ah, my Romola, my dear child!' said the short fat woman, hurrying with frequent steps to keep pace with the majestic young figure beside her; 'what an old scarecrow I am! I must be good - I mean to be good!'

'Yes, yes; buy a cross!' said the guttural voice, while the rough hand was thrust once more before Monna Brigida: for Bratti was not to be abashed by Romola's presence into renouncing a probable customer, and had quietly followed up their retreat. 'Only four quattrini, blessing and all - and if there was any profit, it would all go to the poor.'

Monna Brigida would have been compelled to pause, even if she had been in a less submissive mood. She put up one hand deprecatingly to arrest Romola's remonstrance, and with the other reached out a grosso, worth many white quattrini, saying, in an entreating tone -

'Take it, good man, and begone.'

'You're in the right, madonna,' said Bratti, taking the coin quickly, and thrusting the cross into her hand; 'I'll not offer you change, for I might as well rob you of a mass. What! we must all be scorched a little, but you'll come off the easier; better fall from the window than the roof. A good Easter and a good year to you!'

'Well, Romola,' cried Monna Brigida, pathetically, as Bratti left them, 'if I'm to be a Piagnone it's no matter how I look!'

'Dear cousin,' said Romola, smiling at her affectionately, 'you don't know how much better you look than you ever did before. I see now how good-natured your face is, like yourself. That red and finery seemed to thrust themselves forward and hide expression. Ask our Piero or any other painter if he would not rather paint your portrait now than before. I think all lines of the human face have something

either touching or grand, unless they seem to come from low passions. How fine old men are, like my godfather! Why should not old women look grand and simple?'

'Yes, when one gets to be sixty, my Romola,' said Brigida, relapsing a little; 'but I'm only fifty-five, and Monna Berta, and everybody - but it's no use: I will be good, like you. Your mother, if she'd been alive, would have been as old as I am; we were cousins together. One must either die or get old. But it doesn't matter about being old, if one's a Piagnone.'