

Chapter 53 - On San Miniato

I would speak with you,' said Baldassarre, as Romola looked at him in silent expectation. It was plain that he had followed her, and had been waiting for her. She was going at last to know the secret about him.

'Yes,' she said, with the same sort of submission that she might have shown under an imposed penance. 'But you wish to go where no one can hear us?'

'Where he will not come upon us,' said Baldassarre, turning and glancing behind him timidly. 'Out - in the air - away from the streets.'

'I sometimes go to San Miniato at this hour,' said Romola. 'If you like, I will go now, and you can follow me. It is far, but we can be solitary there.'

He nodded assent, and Romola set out. To some women it might have seemed an alarming risk to go to a comparatively solitary spot with a man who had some of the outward signs of that madness which Tito attributed to him. But Romola was not given to personal fears, and she was glad of the distance that interposed some delay before another blow fell on her. The afternoon was far advanced and the sun was already low in the west, when she paused on some rough ground in the shadow of the cypress-trunks, and looked round for Baldassarre. He was not far off, but when he reached her, he was glad to sink down on an edge of stony earth. His thick-set frame had no longer the sturdy vigour which belonged to it when he first appeared with the rope round him in the Duomo; and under the transient tremor caused by the exertion of walking up the hill, his eyes seemed to have a more helpless vagueness.

'The hill is steep,' said Romola, with compassionate gentleness, seating herself by him. 'And I fear you have been weakened by want?'

He turned his head and fixed his eyes on her in silence, unable, now the moment of speech was come, to seize the words that would convey the thought he wanted to utter: and she remained as motionless as she could, lest he should suppose her impatient. He looked like nothing higher than a common-bred, neglected old man; but she was used now to be very near to such people, and to think a great deal about their troubles. Gradually his glance gathered a more definite expression, and at last he said with abrupt emphasis -

'Ah! you would have been my daughter!'

The swift flush came in Romola's face and went back again as swiftly, leaving her with white lips a little apart, like a marble image of horror.

For her mind, the revelation was made. She divined the facts that lay behind that single word, and in the first moment there could be no check to the impulsive belief which sprang from her keen experience of Tito's nature. The sensitive response of her face was a stimulus to Baldassarre; for the first time his words had wrought their right effect. He went on with gathering eagerness and firmness, laying his hand on her arm.

'You are a woman of proud blood - is it not true? You go to hear the preacher; you hate baseness - baseness that smiles and triumphs. You hate your husband?'

'Oh God! were you really his father?' said Romola, in a low voice, too entirely possessed by the images of the past to take any note of Baldassarre's question. 'Or was it as he said? Did you take him when he was little?'

'Ah, you believe me - you know what he is!' said Baldassarre, exultingly, tightening the pressure on her arm, as if the contact gave him power. 'You will help me?'

'Yes,' said Romola, not interpreting the words as he meant them. She laid her palm gently on the rough hand that grasped her arm, and the tears came to her eyes as she looked at him. 'Oh, it is piteous! Tell me - you were a great scholar, you taught him. How is it?'

She broke off. Tito's allegation of this man's madness had come across her; and where were the signs even of past refinement? But she had the self-command not to move her hand. She sat perfectly still, waiting to listen with new caution.

'It is gone! - it is all gone!' said Baldassarre; 'and they would not believe me, because he lied, and said I was mad and they had me dragged to prison. And I am old - my mind will not come back. And the world is against me.'

He paused a moment, and his eyes sank as if he were under a wave of despondency. Then he looked up at her again, and said with renewed eagerness -

'But you are not against me. He made you love him, and he has been false to you; and you hate him. Yes, he made me love him: he was beautiful and gentle, and I was a lonely man. I took him when they were beating him. He slept in my bosom when he was little, and I watched him as he grew and gave him all my knowledge, and everything that was mine I meant to be his. I had many things; money, and books, and gems. He had my gems - he sold them; and he

left me in slavery. He never came to seek me, and when I came back poor and in misery, he denied me. He said I was a madman.'

'He told us his father was dead - was drowned,' said Romola, faintly. 'Surely he must have believed it then. Oh! he could not have been so base then.'

A vision had risen of what Tito was to her in those first days when she thought no more of wrong in him than a child thinks of poison in flowers. The yearning regret that lay in that memory brought some relief from the tension of horror. With one great sob the tears rushed forth.

'Ah, you are young, and the tears come easily,' said Baldassarre, with some impatience. 'But tears are no good; they only put out the fire within, and it is the fire that works. Tears will hinder us. Listen to me.'

Romola turned towards him with a slight start. Again the possibility of his madness had darted through her mind, and checked the rush of belief. If, after all, this man were only a mad assassin? But her deep belief in this story still lay behind, and it was more in sympathy than in fear that she avoided the risk of paining him by any show of doubt.

'Tell me,' she said, as gently as she could, 'how did you lose your memory - your scholarship.'

'I was ill. I can't tell how long - it was a blank. I remember nothing, only at last I was sitting in the sun among the stones, and everything else was darkness. And slowly, and by degrees, I felt something besides that: a longing for something - I did not know what - that never came. And when I was in the ship on the waters I began to know what I longed for; it was for the Boy to come back - it was to find all my thoughts again, for I was locked away outside them all. And I am outside now. I feel nothing but a wall and darkness.'

Baldassarre had become dreamy again, and sank into silence, resting his head between his hands; and again Romola's belief in him had submerged all cautioning doubts. The pity with which she dwelt on his words seemed like the revival of an old pang. Had she not daily seen how her father missed Dino and the future he had dreamed of in that son?

'It all came back once,' Baldassarre went on presently. 'I was master of everything. I saw all the world again, and my gems, and my books; and I thought I had him in my power, and I went to expose him where - where the lights were and the trees; and he lied again, and said I

was mad, and they dragged me away to prison ... Wickedness is strong; and he wears armour.'

The fierceness had flamed up again. He spoke with his former intensity, and again he grasped Romola's arm.

'But you will help me? He has been false to you too. He has another wife, and she has children. He makes her believe he is her husband, and she is a foolish, helpless thing. I will show you where she lives.'

The first shock that passed through Romola was visibly one of anger. The woman's sense of indignity was inevitably foremost. Baldassarre instinctively felt her in sympathy with him.

'You hate him,' he went on. 'Is it not true? There is no love between you; I know that. I know women can hate; and you have proud blood. You hate falseness, and you can love revenge.'

Romola sat paralysed by the shock of conflicting feelings. She was not conscious of the grasp that was bruising her tender arm.

'You shall contrive it,' said Baldassarre, presently, in an eager whisper. 'I have learned by heart that you are his rightful wife. You are a noble woman. You go to hear the preacher of vengeance; you will help justice. But you will think for me. My mind goes - everything goes sometimes - all but the fire. The fire is God: it is justice: it will not die. You believe that - is it not true? If they will not hang him for robbing me, you will take away his armour - you will make him go without it, and I will stab him. I have a knife, and my arm is still strong enough.'

He put his hand under his tunic, and reached out the hidden knife, feeling the edge abstractedly, as if he needed the sensation to keep alive his ideas.

It seemed to Romola as if every fresh hour of her life were to become more difficult than the last. Her judgment was too vigorous and rapid for her to fall into the mistake of using futile deprecatory words to a man in Baldassarre's state of mind. She chose not to answer his last speech. She would win time for his excitement to allay itself by asking something else that she cared to know. She spoke rather tremulously

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'You say she is foolish and helpless - that other wife - and believes him to be her real husband. Perhaps he is: perhaps he married her before he married me.'

'I cannot tell,' said Baldassarre, pausing in that action of feeling the knife, and looking bewildered. 'I can remember no more. I only know

where she lives. You shall see her. I will take you; but not now,' he added hurriedly, 'he may be there. The night is coming on.'

'It is true,' said Romola, starting up with a sudden consciousness that the sun had set and the hills were darkening; 'but you will come and take me - when?'

'In the morning' said Baldassarre, dreaming that she, too, wanted to hurry to her vengeance.

'Come to me, then, where you came to me to-day, in the church. I will be there at ten; and if you are not there, I will go again towards mid-day. Can you remember?'

'Mid-day,' said Baldassarre - 'only mid-day. The same place, and mid-day. And, after that,' he added, rising and grasping her arm again with his left hand, while he held the knife in his right; 'we will have our revenge. He shall feel the sharp edge of justice. The world is against me, but you will help me.'

'I would help you in other ways,' said Romola, making a first, timid effort to dispel his illusion about her. 'I fear you are in want; you have to labour, and get little. I should like to bring you comforts, and make you feel again that there is some one who cares for you.'

'Talk no more about that,' said Baldassarre, fiercely. 'I will have nothing else. Help me to wring one drop of vengeance on this side of the grave. I have nothing but my knife. It is sharp; but there is a moment after the thrust when men see the face of death, - and it shall be my face that he will see.'

He loosed his hold, and sank down again in a sitting posture. Romola felt helpless: she must defer all intentions till the morrow.

'Mid-day, then,' she said, in a distinct voice.

'Yes,' he answered, with an air of exhaustion. 'Go; I will rest here.'

She hastened away. Turning at the last spot whence he was likely to be in sight, she saw him seated still.