

Chapter 54 - The Evening and the Morning

Romola had a purpose in her mind as she was hastening away; a purpose which had been growing through the afternoon hours like a side-stream, rising higher and higher along with the main current. It was less a resolve than a necessity of her feeling. Heedless of the darkening streets, and not caring to call for Maso's slow escort, she hurried across the bridge where the river showed itself black before the distant dying red, and took the most direct way to the Old Palace. She might encounter her husband there. No matter. She could not weigh probabilities; she must discharge her heart. She did not know what she passed in the pillared court or up the wide stairs; she only knew that she asked an usher for the Gonfaloniere, giving her name, and begging to be shown into a private room.

She was not left long alone with the frescoed figures and the newly-lit tapers. Soon the door opened, and Bernardo del Nero entered, still carrying his white head erect above his silk lucco.

'Romola, my child, what is this?' he said, in a tone of anxious surprise as he closed the door.

She had uncovered her head and went towards him without speaking. He laid his hand on her shoulder, and held her a little way from him that he might see her better. Her face was haggard from fatigue and long agitation, her hair had rolled down in disorder; but there was an excitement in her eyes that seemed to have triumphed over the bodily consciousness.

'What has he done?' said Bernardo, abruptly. 'Tell me everything, child; throw away pride. I am your father,'

'It is not about myself - nothing about myself,' said Romola, hastily. 'Dearest godfather, it is about you. I have heard things - some I cannot tell you. But you are in danger in the palace; you are in danger everywhere. There are fanatical men who would harm you, and - and there are traitors. Trust nobody. If you trust, you will be betrayed.' Bernardo smiled.

'Have you worked yourself up into this agitation, my poor child,' he said, raising his hand to her head and patting it gently, 'to tell such old truth as that to an old man like me?'

'Oh no, no! they are not old truths that I mean,' said Romola, pressing her clasped hands painfully together, as if that action would help her to suppress what must not be told. 'They are fresh things that I know, but cannot tell. Dearest godfather, you know I am not foolish. I would not come to you without reason. Is it too late to warn you against any

one, every one who seems to be working on your side? Is it too late to say, 'Go to your villa and keep away in the country when these three more days of office are over?' Oh God! perhaps it is too late! and if any harm comes to you, it will be as if I had done it!

The last words had burst from Romola involuntarily: a long-stifled feeling had found spasmodic utterance. But she herself was startled and arrested.

'I mean,' she added, hesitantly, 'I know nothing positive. I only know what fills me with fears.'

'Poor child!' said Bernardo, looking at her with quiet penetration for a moment or two. Then he said: 'Go, Romola - go home and rest. These fears may be only big ugly shadows of something very little and harmless. Even traitors must see their interest in betraying; the rats will run where they smell the cheese, and there is no knowing yet which way the scent will come.'

He paused, and turned away his eyes from her with an air of abstraction, till, with a slow shrug, he added -

'As for warnings, they are of no use to me, child. I enter into no plots, but I never forsake my colours. If I march abreast with obstinate men, who will rush on guns and pikes, I must share the consequences. Let us say no more about that. I have not many years left at the bottom of my sack for them to rob me of. Go, child; go home and rest.'

He put his hand on her head again caressingly, and she could not help clinging to his arm, and pressing her brow against his shoulder. Her godfather's caress seemed the last thing that was left to her out of that young filial life, which now looked so happy to her even in its troubles, for they were troubles untainted by anything hateful.

'Is silence best, my Romola?' said the old man.

'Yes, now; but I cannot tell whether it always will be,' she answered, hesitantly, raising her head with an appealing look.

'Well, you have a father's ear while I am above ground' - he lifted the black drapery and folded it round her head, adding - 'and a father's home; remember that.' Then opening the door, he said: 'There, hasten away. You are like a black ghost: you will be safe enough.'

When Romola fell asleep that night, she slept deep. Agitation had reached its limits; she must gather strength before she could suffer more; and, in spite of rigid habit, she slept on far beyond sunrise.

When she awoke, it was to the sound of guns. Piero de' Medici, with thirteen hundred men at his back, was before the gate that looks towards Rome.

So much Romola learned from Maso, with many circumstantial additions of dubious quality. A countryman had come in and alarmed the Signoria before it was light, else the city would have been taken by surprise. His master was not in the house, having been summoned to the Palazzo long ago. She sent out the old man again, that he might gather news, while she went up to the loggia from time to time to try and discern any signs of the dreaded entrance having been made, or of its having been effectively repelled. Maso brought her word that the great Piazza was full of armed men, and that many of the chief citizens suspected as friends of the Medici had been summoned to the palace and detained there. Some of the people seemed not to mind whether Piero got in or not, and some said the Signoria itself had invited him; but however that might be, they were giving him an ugly welcome; and the soldiers from Pisa were coming against him.

In her memory of those morning hours, there were not many things that Romola could distinguish as actual external experiences standing markedly out above the tumultuous waves of retrospect and anticipation. She knew that she had really walked to the Badia by the appointed time in spite of street alarms; she knew that she had waited there in vain. And the scene she had witnessed when she came out of the church, and stood watching on the steps while the doors were being closed behind her for the afternoon interval, always came back to her like a remembered waking.

There was a change in the faces and tones of the people, armed and unarmed, who were pausing or hurrying along the streets. The guns were firing again, but the sound only provoked laughter. She soon knew the cause of the change. Piero de' Medici and his horsemen had turned their backs on Florence, and were galloping as fast as they could along the Siena road. She learned this from a substantial shop-keeping Piagnone, who had not yet laid down his pike.

'It is true,' he ended, with a certain bitterness in his emphasis. 'Piero is gone, but there are those left behind who were in the secret of his coming - we all know that; and if the new Signoria does its duty we shall soon know how they are.'

The words darted through Romola like a sharp spasm; but the evil they foreshadowed was not yet close upon her, and as she entered her home again, her most pressing anxiety was the possibility that she had lost sight for a long while of Baldassarre.