Chapter 56 - The Other Wife

The morning warmth was already beginning to be rather oppressive to Romola, when, after a walk along by the walls on her way from San Marco, she turned towards the intersecting streets again at the gate of Santa Croce.

The Borgo La Croce was so still, that she listened to her own footsteps on the pavement in the sunny silence, until, on approaching a bend in the street, she saw, a few yards before her, a little child not more than three years old, with no other clothing than his white shirt, pause from a waddling run and look around him. In the first moment of coming nearer she could only see his back - a boy's back, square and sturdy, with a cloud of reddish-brown curls above it; but in the next he turned towards her, and she could see his dark eyes wide with tears, and his lower lip pushed up and trembling, while his fat brown fists dutched his shirt helplessly. The glimpse of a tall black figure sending a shadow over him brought his bewildered fear to a climax, and a loud crying sob sent the big tears rolling.

Romola, with the ready maternal instinct which was one hidden source of her passionate tenderness, instantly uncovered her head, and, stooping down on the pavement, put her arms round him, and her cheeks against his, while she spoke to him in caressing tones. At first his sobs were only the louder, but he made no effort to get away, and presently the outburst ceased with that strange abruptness which belongs to childish joys and griefs: his face lost its distortion, and was fixed in an open-mouthed gaze at Romola.

'You have lost yourself, little one,' she said, kissing him. 'Never mind I we will find the house again. Perhaps mamma will meet us.'

She divined that he had made his escape at a moment when the mother's eyes were turned away from him, and thought it likely that he would soon be followed.

'Oh, what a heavy, heavy boy!' she said, trying to lift him. 'I cannot carry you. Come, then, you must toddle back by my side.'

The parted lips remained motionless in awed silence, and one brown fist still clutched the shirt with as much tenacity as ever; but the other yielded itself quite willingly to the wonderful white hand, strong but soft.

'You have a mamma?' said Romola, as they set out, looking down at the boy with a certain yearning. But he was mute. A girl under those circumstances might perhaps have chirped abundantly; not so this square-shouldered little man with the big cloud of curls.

He was awake to the first sign of his whereabout, however. At the turning by the front of San Ambrogio he dragged Romola towards it, looking up at her.

'Ah, that is the way home, is it?' she said, smiling at him. He only thrust his head forward and pulled, as an admonition that they should go faster.

There was still another turning that he had a decided opinion about, and then Romola found herself in a short street leading to open garden ground. It was in front of a house at the end of this street that the little fellow paused, pulling her towards some stone stairs. He had evidently no wish for her to loose his hand, and she would not have been willing to leave him without being sure that she was delivering him to his friends. They mounted the stairs, seeing but dimly in that sudden withdrawal from the sunlight, till, at the final landing-place, an extra stream of light came from an open doorway. Passing through a small lobby, they came to another open door, and there Romola paused. Her approach had not been heard.

On a low chair at the farther end of the room, opposite the light, sat Tessa, with one hand on the edge of the cradle, and her head hanging a little on one side, fast asleep. Near one of the windows, with her back turned towards the door, sat Monna Lisa at her work of preparing salad, in deaf unconsciousness. There was only an instant for Romola's eyes to take in that still scene; for Lillo snatched his hand away from her and ran up to his mother's side, not making any direct effort to wake her, but only leaning his head back against her arm, and surveying Romola seriously from that distance.

As Lillo pushed against her, Tessa opened her eyes, and looked up in bewilderment; but her glance had no sooner rested on the figure at the opposite doorway than she started up, blushed deeply, and began to tremble a little, neither speaking nor moving forward.

'Ah I we have seen each other before,' said Romola, smiling, and coming forward. 'I am glad it was your little boy. He was crying in the street; I suppose he had run away. So we walked together a little way, and then he knew where he was, and brought me here. But you had not missed him? That is well, else you would have been frightened.'

The shock of finding that Lillo had run away overcame every other feeling in Tessa for the moment. Her colour went again, and, seizing Lillo's arm, she ran with him to Monna Lisa, saying, with a half sob, loud in the old woman's ear -

'Oh, Lisa, you are wicked! Why will you stand with your back to the door? Lillo ran away ever so far into the street.'

'Holy Mother!' said Monna Lisa, in her meek, thick tone, letting the spoon fall from her hands. 'Where were you, then? I thought you were there, and had your eye on hum.'

'But you know I go to sleep when I am rocking,' said Tessa, in pettish remonstrance.

'Well, well, we must keep the outer door shut, or else tie him up,' said Monna Lisa, 'for he'll be as cunning as Satan before long, and that's the holy truth. But how came he back, then?'

This question recalled Tessa to the consciousness of Romola's presence. Without answering, she turned towards her, blushing and timid again, and Monna Lisa's eyes followed her movement. The old woman made a low reverence, and said -

'Doubtless the most noble lady brought him back.' Then, advancing a little nearer to Romola, she added, 'It's my shame for him to have been found with only his shirt on; but he kicked, and wouldn't have his other clothes on this morning, and the mother, poor thing, will never hear of his being beaten. But what's an old woman to do without a stick when the lad's legs get so strong? Let your nobleness look at his legs.'

Lillo, conscious that his legs were in question, pulled his shirt up a little higher, and looked down at their olive roundness with a dispassionate and curious air. Romola laughed, and stooped to give him a caressing shake and a kiss, and this action helped the reassurance that Tessa had already gathered from Monna Lisa's address to Romola. For when Naldo had been told about the adventure at the Carnival, and Tessa had asked him who the heavenly lady that had come just when she was wanted, and had vanished so soon, was likely to be - whether she could be the Holy Madonna herself? - he had answered, 'Not exactly, my Tessa; only one of the saints,' and had not chosen to say more. So that in the dream-like combination of small experience which made up Tessa's thought, Romola had remained confusedly associated with the pictures in the churches, and when she reappeared, the grateful remembrance of her protection was slightly tinctured with religious awe - not deeply, for Tessa's dread was chiefly of ugly and evil beings. It seemed unlikely that good beings would be angry and punish her, as it was the nature of Nofri and the devil to do. And now that Monna Lisa had spoken freely about Lillo's legs and Romola had laughed, Tessa was more at her ease.

'Ninna's in the cradle,' she said. 'She's pretty too.'

Romola went to look at the sleeping Ninna, and Monna Lisa, one of the exceptionally meek deaf, who never expect to be spoken to, returned to her salad.

'Ah! she is waking: she has opened her blue eyes,' said Romola. 'You must take her up, and I will sit down in this chair - may I? - and nurse Lillo. Come, Lillo.'

She sat down in Tito's chair, and put out her arms towards the lad, whose eyes had followed her. He hesitated: and, pointing his small fingers at her with a half-puzzled, half-angry feeling, said, 'That's Babbo's chair,' not seeing his way out of the difficulty if Babbo came and found Romola in his place.

'But Babbo is not here, and I shall go soon. Come, let me nurse you as he does,' said Romola, wondering to herself for the first time what sort of Babbo he was whose wife was dressed in contadina fashion, but had a certain daintiness about her person that indicated idleness and plenty. Lillo consented to be lifted up, and, finding the lap exceedingly comfortable, began to explore her dress and hands, to see if there were any ornaments beside the rosary.

Tessa, who had hitherto been occupied in coaxing Ninna out of her waking peevishness, now sat down in her low chair, near Romola's knee, arranging Ninna's tiny person to advantage, jealous that the strange lady too seemed to notice the boy most, as Naldo did.

'Lillo was going to be angry with me, because I sat in Babbo's chair,' said Romola, as she bent forward to kiss Ninna's little foot. 'Will he come soon and want it?'

'Ah, no!' said Tessa, 'you can sit in it a long while. I shall be sorry when you go. When you first came to take care of me at the Carnival, I thought it was wonderful; you came and went away again so fast. And Naldo said, perhaps you were a saint, and that made me tremble a little, though the saints are very good, I know; and you were good to me, and now you have taken care of Lillo. Perhaps you will always come and take care of me. That was how Naldo did a long while ago; he came and took care of me when I was frightened, one San Giovanni. I couldn't think where he came from - he was so beautiful and good. And so are you,' ended Tessa, looking up at Romola with devout admiration.

'Naldo is your husband. His eyes are like Lillo's,' said Romola, looking at the boy's darkly-pencilled eyebrows, unusual at his age. She did not speak interrogatively, but with a quiet certainty of inference which was necessarily mysterious to Tessa.

'Ah! you know him!' she said, pausing a little in wonder. 'Perhaps you know Nofri and Peretola, and our house on the hill, and everything. Yes, like Lillo's; but not his hair. His hair is dark and long-' she went on, getting rather excited. 'Ah! if you know it, ecco!'

She had put her hand to a thin red silk cord that hung round her neck, and drew from her bosom the tiny old parchment Breve, the horn of red coral, and a long dark curl carefully tied at one end and suspended with those mystic treasures. She held them towards Romola, away from Ninna's snatching hand.

'It is a fresh one. I cut it lately. See how bright it is!' she said, laying it against the white background of Romola's fingers. 'They get dim, and then he lets me cut another when his hair is grown; and I put it with the Breve, because sometimes he is away a long while, and then I think it helps to take care of me.'

A slight shiver passed through Romola as the curl was laid across her fingers. At Tessa's first mention of her husband as having come mysteriously she knew not whence, a possibility had risen before Romola that made her heart beat faster; for to one who is anxiously in search of a certain object the faintest suggestions have a peculiar significance. And when the curl was held towards her, it seemed for an instant like a mocking phantasm of the lock she herself had cut to wind with one of her own five years ago. But she preserved her outward calmness, bent not only on knowing the truth, but also on coming to that knowledge in a way that would not pain this poor, trusting, ignorant thing, with the child's mind in the woman's body. 'Foolish and helpless: ' yes; so far she corresponded to Baldassarre's account.

'It is a beautiful curl,' she said, resisting the impulse to withdraw her hand. 'Lillo's curls will be like it, perhaps, for his cheek, too, is dark. And you never know where your husband goes to when he leaves you?'

'No,' said Tessa, putting back her treasures out of the children's way. 'But I know Messer San Michele takes care of him, for he gave him a beautiful coat, all made of little chains; and if he puts that on, nobody can kill him. And perhaps, if -' Tessa hesitated a little, under a recurrence of that original dreamy wonder about Romola which had been expelled by chatting contact - 'if you were a saint, you would take care of him, too, because you have taken care of me and Lillo.'

An agitated flush came over Romola's face in the first moment of certainty, but she had bent her cheek against Lillo's head. The feeling that leaped out in that flush was something like exultation at the thought that the wife's burden might be about to slip from her

overladen shoulders; that this little ignorant creature might prove to be Tito's lawful wife. A strange exultation for a proud and high-born woman to have been brought to! But it seemed to Romola as if that were the only issue that would make duty anything else for her than an insoluble problem. Yet she was not deaf to Tessa's last appealing words; she raised her head, and said, in her clearest tones -

'I will always take care of you if I see you need me. But that beautiful coat? your husband did not wear it when you were first married? Perhaps he used not to be so long away from you then?'

'Ah, yes! he was. Much - much longer. So long, I thought he would never come back. I used to cry. Oh me! I was beaten then; a long, long while ago at Peretola, where we had the goats and mules.'

'And how long had you been married before your husband had that chain coat?' said Romola, her heart beating faster and faster.

Tessa looked meditative, and began to count on her fingers, and Romola watched the fingers as if they would tell the secret of her destiny.

'The chestnuts were ripe when we were married,' said Tessa, marking off her thumb and fingers again as she spoke; 'and then again they were ripe at Peretola before he came back, and then again, after that, on the hill. And soon the soldiers came, and we heard the trumpets, and then Naldo had the coat.'

'You had been married more than two years. In which church were you married?' said Romola, too entirely absorbed by one thought to put any question that was less direct. Perhaps before the next morning she might go to her godfather and say that she was not Tito Melema's lawful wife - that the vows which had bound her to strive after an impossible union had been made void beforehand.

Tessa gave a slight start at Romola's new tone of inquiry, and looked up at her with a hesitating expression. Hitherto she had prattled on without consciousness that she was making revelations, any more than when she said old things over and over again to Monna Lisa.

'Naldo said I was never to tell about that,' she said, doubtfully. 'Do you think he would not be angry if I told you?'

'It is right that you should tell me. Tell me everything,' said Romola, looking at her with mild authority.

If the impression from Naldo's command had been much more recent than it was, the constraining effect of Romola's mysterious authority

would have overcome it. But the sense that she was telling what she had never told before made her begin with a lowered voice.

'It was not in a church - it was at the Nativita, when there was a fair, and all the-people went overnight to see the Madonna in the Nunziata, and my mother was ill and couldn't go, and I took the bunch of cocoons for her; and then he came to me in the church and I heard him say, 'Tessa! ' I knew him because he had taken care of me at the San Giovanni, and then we went into the piazza where the fair was, and I had some berlingozzi, for I was hungry and he was very good to me; and at the end of the piazza there was a holy father, and an altar like what they have at the processions outside the churches. So he married us, and then Naldo took me back into the church and left me; and I went home, and my mother died, and Nofri began to beat me more, and Naldo never came back. And I used to cry, and once at the Carnival I saw him and followed him, and he was angry, and said he would come some time, I must wait. So I went and waited; but, oh! it was a long while before he came; but he would have come if he could, for he was good; and then he took me away, because I cried and said I could not bear to stay with Nofri. And, oh! I was so glad, and since then I have been always happy, for I don't mind about the goats and mules, because I have Lillo and Ninna now; and Naldo is never angry, only I think he doesn't love Ninna so well as Lillo, and she is pretty.'

Quite forgetting that she had thought her speech rather momentous at the beginning, Tessa fell to devouring Ninna with kisses, while Romola sat in silence with absent eyes. It was inevitable that in this moment she should think of the three beings before her chiefly in their relation to her own lot, and she was feeling the chill of disappointment that her difficulties were not to be solved by external law. She had relaxed her hold of Lillo, and was leaning her cheek against her hand, seeing nothing of the scene around her. Lillo was quick in perceiving a change that was not agreeable to him; he had not yet made any return to her caresses, but he objected to their withdrawal, and putting up both his brown arms to pull her head towards him, he said, 'Play with me again!'

Romola, roused from her self-absorption, clasped the lad anew, and looked from him to Tessa, who had now paused from her shower of kisses, and seemed to have returned to the more placid delight of contemplating the heavenly lady's face. That face was undergoing a subtle change, like the gradual oncoming of a warmer, softer light. Presently Romola took her scissors from her scarsella, and cut off one of her long wavy locks, while the three pair of wide eyes followed her movements with kitten-like observation.

'I must go away from you now,' she said, 'but I will leave this lock of hair that it may remind you of me, because if you are ever in trouble

you can think that perhaps God will send me to take care of you again. I cannot tell you where to find me, but if I ever know that you want me, I will come to you. Addio!'

She had set down Lillo hurriedly, and held out her hand to Tessa, who kissed it with a mixture of awe and sorrow at this parting. Romola's mind was oppressed with thoughts; she needed to be alone as soon as possible, but with her habitual care for the least fortunate, she turned aside to put her hand in a friendly way on Monna Lisa's shoulder and make her a farewell sign. Before the old woman-had finished her deep reverence, Romola had disappeared.

Monna Lisa and Tessa moved towards each other by simultaneous impulses, while the two children stood clinging to their mother's skirts as if they, too, felt the atmosphere of awe.

'Do you think she was a saint?' said Tessa, in Lisa's ear, showing her the lock.

Lisa rejected that notion very decidedly by a backward movement of her fingers, and then stroking the rippled gold, said -

'She's a great and noble lady. I saw such in my youth.'

Romola went home and sat alone through the sultry hours of that day with the heavy certainty that her lot was unchanged. She was thrown back again on the conflict between the demands of an outward law, which she recognised as a widely-ramifying obligation, and the demands of inner moral facts which were becoming more and more peremptory. She had drunk in deeply the spirit of that teaching by which Savonarola had urged her to return to her place. She felt that the sanctity attached to all close relations, and, therefore, preeminently to the closest, was but the expression in outward law of that result towards which all human goodness and nobleness must spontaneously tend; that the light abandonment of ties, whether inherited or voluntary, because they had ceased to be pleasant, was the uprooting af social and personal virtue. What else had Tito's crime towards Baldassarre been but that abandonment working itself out to the most hideous extreme of falsity and ingratitude?

And the inspiring consciousness breathed into her by Savonarola's influence that her lot was vitally united with the general lot had exalted even the minor details of obligation into religion. She was marching with a great army; she was feeling the stress of a common life. If victims were needed, and it was uncertain on whom the lot might fall, she would stand ready to answer to her name. She had stood long; she had striven hard to fulfil the bond, but she had seen all the conditions which made the fulfilment possible gradually

forsaking her. The one effect of her marriage-tie seemed to be the stifling predominance over her of a nature that she despised. All her efforts at union had only made its impossibility more palpable, and the relation had become for her simply a degrading servitude. The law was sacred. Yes, but the rebellion might be sacred too. It flashed upon her mind that the problem before her was essentially the same as that which had lain before Savonarola - the problem where the sacredness of obedience ended, and where the sacredness of rebellion began. To her, as to him, there had come one of those moments in life when the soul must dare to act on its own warrant, not only without external law to appeal to, but in the face of a law which is not unarmed with Divine lightnings - lightnings that may yet fall if the warrant has been false.

Before the sun had gone down she had adopted a resolve. She would ask no counsel of her godfather or of Savonarola until she had made one determined effort to speak freely with Tito and obtain his consent that she should live apart from him. She desired not to leave him clandestinely again, or to forsake Florence. She would tell him that if he ever felt a real need of her, she would come back to him. Was not that the utmost faithfulness to her bond that could be required of her? A shuddering anticipation came over her that he would clothe a refusal in a sneering suggestion that she should enter a convent as the only mode of quitting him that would not be scandalous. He knew well that her mind revolted from that means of escape, not only because of her own repugnance to a narrow rule, but because all the cherished memories of her father forbade that she should adopt a mode of life which was associated with his deepest griefs and his bitterest dislike.

Tito had announced his intention of coming home this evening. She would wait for him, and say what she had to say at once, for it was difficult to get his ear during the day. If he had the slightest suspicion that personal words were coming, he slipped away with an appearance of unpremeditated ease. When she sent for Maso to tell him that she would wait for his master, she observed that the old man looked at her and lingered with a mixture of hesitation and wondering anxiety; but finding that she asked him no question, he slowly turned away. Why should she ask questions? Perhaps Maso only knew or guessed something of what she knew already.

It was late before Tito came. Romola had been pacing up and down the long room which had once been the library, with the windows open, and a loose white linen robe on instead of her usual black garment. She was glad of that change after the long hours of heat and motionless meditation; but the coolness and exercise made her more intensely wakeful, and as she went with the lamp in her hand to open the door for Tito, he might well have been startled by the vividness of

her eyes and the expression of painful resolution, which was in contrast with her usual self-restrained quiescence before him. But it seemed that this excitement was just what he expected.

'Ah! it is you, Romola. Maso is gone to bed,' he said, in a grave, quiet tone, interposing to close the door for her. Then, turning round, he said, looking at her more fully than he was wont, 'You have heard it all, I see.'

Romola quivered. He then was inclined to take the initiative. He had been to Tessa. She led the way through the nearest door, set down her lamp, and turned towards him again.

'You must not think despairingly of the consequences,' said Tito, in a tone of soothing encouragement, at which Romola stood wondering, until he added, 'The accused have too many family ties with all parties not to escape; and Messer Bernardo del Nero has other things in his favour besides his age.'

Romola started, and gave a cry as if she had been suddenly stricken by a sharp weapon.

'What! you did not know it?' said Tito, putting his hand under her arm that he might lead her to a seat; but she seemed to be unaware of his touch.

'Tell me,' she said, hastily - 'tell me what it is.'

'A man, whose name you may forget - Lamberto dell' Antella - who was banished, has been seized within the territory: a letter has been found on him of very dangerous import to the chief Mediceans, and the scoundrel, who was once a favourite hound of Piero de' Medici, is ready now to swear what any one pleases against him or his friends. Some have made their escape, but five are now in prison.'

'My godfather?' said Romola, scarcely above a whisper, as Tito made a slight pause.

'Yes: I grieve to say it. But along with him there are three, at least, whose names have a commanding interest even among the popular party - Niccolo Ridolfi, Lorenzo Tornabuoni, and Giannozzo Pucci.'

The tide of Romola's feelings had been violently turned into a new channel. In the tumult of that moment there could be no check to the words which came as the impulsive utterance of her long-accumulating horror. When Tito had named the men of whom she felt certain he was the confederate, she said, with a recoiling gesture and low-toned bitterness -

'And you - you are safe?'

'You are certainly an amiable wife, my Romola,' said Tito, with the coldest irony. 'Yes; I am safe.'

They turned away from each other in silence.