

Chapter 59 - Pleading

The morning was in its early brightness when Romola was again on her way to San Marco, having obtained through Fra Salvestro, the evening before, the promise of an interview with Fra Girolamo in the chapter-house of the convent. The rigidity with which Savonarola guarded his life from all the pretexts of calumny made such interviews very rare, and whenever they were granted, they were kept free from any appearance of mystery. For this reason the hour chosen was one at which there were likely to be other visitors in the outer cloisters of San Marco.

She chose to pass through the heart of the city that she might notice the signs of public feeling. Every loggia, every convenient corner of the piazza, every shop that made a rendezvous for gossips, was astir with the excitement of gratuitous debate; a languishing trade tending to make political discussion all the more vigorous. It was clear that the parties for and against the death of the conspirators were bent on making the fullest use of the three days' interval in order to determine the popular mood. Already handbills were in circulation; some presenting, in large print, the alternative of justice on the conspirators or ruin to the Republic; others in equally large print urging the observance of the law and the granting of the Appeal. Round these jutting islets of black capitals there were lakes of smaller characters setting forth arguments less necessary to be read: for it was an opinion entertained at that time (in the first flush of triumph at the discovery of printing), that there was no argument more widely convincing than question-begging phrases in large type.

Romola, however, cared especially to become acquainted with the arguments in smaller type, and, though obliged to hasten forward, she looked round anxiously as she went that she might miss no opportunity of securing copies. For a long way she saw none but such as were in the hands of eager readers, or else fixed on the walls, from which in some places the sbirri were tearing them down. But at last, passing behind San Giovanni with a quickened pace that she might avoid the many acquaintances who frequented the piazza, she saw Bratti with a stock of handbills which he appeared to be exchanging for small coin with the passers-by. She was too familiar with the humble life of Florence for Bratti to be any stranger to her, and turning towards him she said, 'Have you two sorts of handbills, Bratti? Let me have them quickly.'

'Two sorts,' said Bratti, separating the wet sheets with a slowness that tried Romola's patience. 'There's 'Law,' and there's 'Justice.'

'Which sort do you sell most of?'

'Justice' - 'Justice' goes the quickest, - so I raised the price, and made it two danari. But then I bethought me the 'Law' was good ware too, and had as good a right to be charged for as 'Justice;' for people set no store by cheap things, and if I sold the 'Law' at one danaro, I should be doing it a wrong. And I'm a fair trader. 'Law,' or 'Justice,' it's all one to me; they're good wares. I got 'em both for nothing, and I sell 'em at a fair profit. But you'll want more than one of a sort?'

'No, no: here's a white quattrino for the two,' said Romola, folding up the bills and hurrying away.

She was soon in the outer cloisters of San Marco, where Fra Salvestro was awaiting her under the cloister, but did not notice the approach of her light step. He was chatting, according to his habit, with lay visitors; for under the auspices of a government friendly to the Frate, the timidity about frequenting San Marco, which had followed on the first shock of the Excommunication, had been gradually giving way. In one of these lay visitors she recognised a well-known satellite of Francesco Valori, named Andrea Cambini,' who was narrating or expounding with emphatic gesticulation, while Fra Salvestro was listening with that air of trivial curiosity which tells that the listener cares very much about news and very little about its quality. This characteristic of her confessor, which was always repulsive to Romola, was made exasperating to her at this moment by the certainty she gathered, from the disjointed words which reached her ear, that Cambini was narrating something relative to the fate of the conspirators. She chose not to approach the group, but as soon as she saw that she had arrested Fra Salvestro's attention, she turned towards the door of the chapter-house, while he, making a sign of approval, disappeared within the inner cloister. A lay Brother stood ready to open the door of the chapter-house for her, and closed it behind her as she entered.

Once more looked at by those sad frescoed figures which had seemed to be mourning with her at the death of her brother Dino, it was inevitable that something of that scene should come back to her; but the intense occupation of her mind with the present made the remembrance less a retrospect than an indistinct recurrence of impressions which blended themselves with her agitating fears, as if her actual anxiety were a revival of the strong yearning she had once before brought to this spot - to be repelled by marble rigidity. She gave no space for the remembrance to become more definite, for she at once opened the handbills, thinking she should perhaps be able to read them in the interval before Fra Girolamo appeared. But by the time she had read to the end of the one that recommended the observance of the law, the door was opening, and doubling up the papers she stood expectant.

When the Frate had entered she knelt, according to the usual practice of those who saw him in private; but as soon as he had uttered a benedictory greeting she rose and stood opposite to him at a few yards' distance. Owing to his seclusion since he had been excommunicated, it had been an unusually long while since she had seen him, and the late months had visibly deepened in his face the marks of overtaxed mental activity and bodily severities; and yet Romola was not so conscious of this change as of another, which was less definable. Was it that the expression of serene elevation and pure human fellowship which had once moved her was no longer present in the same force, or was it that the sense of his being divided from her in her feeling about her godfather roused the slumbering sources of alienation, and marred her own vision? Perhaps both causes were at work. Our relations with our fellow-men are most often determined by coincident currents of that sort; the inexcusable word or deed seldom comes until after affection or reverence has been already enfeebled by the strain of repeated excuses.

It was true that Savonarola's glance at Romola had some of that hardness which is caused by an egotistic prepossession. He divined that the interview she had sought was to turn on the fate of the conspirators, a subject on which he had already had to quell inner voices that might become loud again when encouraged from without. Seated in his cell, correcting the sheets of his 'Triumph of the Cross,' it was easier to repose on a resolution of neutrality.

'It is a question of moment, doubtless, on which you wished to see me, my daughter,' he began, in a tone which was gentle rather from self-control than from immediate inclination. 'I know you are not wont to lay stress on small matters.'

'Father, you know what it is before I tell you,' said Romola, forgetting everything else as soon as she began to pour forth her plea. 'You know what I am caring for - it is for the life of the old man I love best in the world. The thought of him has gone together with the thought of my father as long as I remember the daylight. That is my warrant for coming to you, even if my coming should have been needless. Perhaps it is: perhaps you have already determined that your power over the hearts of men shall be used to prevent them from denying to Florentines a right which you yourself helped to earn for them.'

'I meddle not with the functions of the State, my daughter,' said Fra Girolamo, strongly disinclined to reopen externally a debate which he had already gone through inwardly. 'I have preached and laboured that Florence should have a good government, for a good government is needful to the perfecting of the Christian life; but I keep away my hands from particular affairs which it is the office of experienced citizens to administer.'

'Surely, father-' Romola broke off. She had uttered this first word almost impetuously, but she was checked by the counter-agitation of feeling herself in an attitude of remonstrance towards the man who had been the source of guidance and strength to her. In the act of rebelling she was bruising her own reverence.

Savonarola was too keen not to divine something of the conflict that was arresting her - too noble, deliberately to assume in calm speech that self-justifying evasiveness into which he was often hurried in public by the crowding impulses of the orator.

'Say what is in your heart; speak on, my daughter,' he said, standing with his arms laid one upon the other, and looking at her with quiet expectation.

'I was going to say, father, that this matter is surely of higher moment than many about which I have heard you preach and exhort fervidly. If it belonged to you to urge that men condemned for offences against the State should have the right to appeal to the Great Council - if -' Romola was getting eager again - 'if you count it a glory to have won that right for them, can it less belong to you to declare yourself against the right being denied to almost the first men who need it? Surely that touches the Christian life more closely than whether you knew beforehand that the Dauphin would die, or whether Pisa will be conquered.'

There was a subtle movement, like a subdued sign of pain, in Savonarola's strong lips, before he began to speak.

'My daughter, I speak as it is given me to speak - I am not master of the times when I may become the vehicle of knowledge beyond the common lights of men. In this case I have no illumination beyond what wisdom may give to those who are charged with the safety of the State. As to the law of Appeal against the Six Votes, I laboured to have it passed in order that no Florentine should be subject to loss of life and goods through the private hatred of a few who might happen to be in power; but these five men, who have desired to overthrow a free government and restore a corrupt tyrant, have been condemned with the assent of a large assembly of their fellow-citizens. They refused at first to have their cause brought before the Great Council. They have lost the right to appeal.'

'How can they have lost it?' said Romola. 'It is the right to appeal against condemnation, and they have never been condemned till now; and, forgive me, father, it is private hatred that would deny them the appeal; it is the violence of the few that frightens others; else why was the assembly divided again directly after it had seemed to agree? And if anything weighs against the observance of the law, let this weigh for

it - this, that you used to preach more earnestly than all else, that there should be no place given to hatred and bloodshed because of these party strifes, so that private ill-will should not find its opportunities in public acts. Father, you know that there is private hatred concerned here: will it not dishonour you not to have interposed on the side of mercy, when there are many who hold that it is also the side of law and justice?'

'My daughter,' said Fra Girolamo, with more visible emotion than before, 'there is a mercy which is weakness, and even treason against the common good. The safety of Florence, which means even more than the welfare of Florentines, now demands severity, as it once demanded mercy. It is not only for a past plot that these men are condemned, but also for a plot which has not yet been executed; and the devices that were leading to its execution are not put an end to: the tyrant is still gathering his forces in Romagna, and the enemies of Florence, who sit in the highest places of Italy, are ready to hurl any stone that will crush her.'

'What plot?' said Romola, reddening, and trembling with alarmed surprise.

'You carry papers in your hand, I see,' said Fra Girolamo, pointing to the handbills. 'One of them will, perhaps, tell you that the government has had new information.'

Romola hastily opened the handbill she had not yet read, and saw that the government had now positive evidence of a second plot, which was to have been carried out in this August time. To her mind it was like reading a confirmation that Tito had won his safety by foul means; his pretence of wishing that the Frate should exert himself on behalf of the condemned only helped the wretched conviction. She crushed up the paper in her hand, and, turning to Savonarola, she said, with new passion, 'Father, what safety can there be for Florence when the worst man can always escape? And,' she went on, a sudden flash of remembrance coming from the thought about her husband, 'have not you yourself encouraged this deception which corrupts the life of Florence, by wanting more favour to be shown to Lorenzo Tornabuoni, who has worn two faces, and flattered you with a show of affection, when my godfather has always been honest? Ask all Florence who of those five men has the truest heart, and there will not be many who will name any other name than Bernardo del Nero. You did interpose with Francesco Valori for the sake of one prisoner: you have not then been neutral; and you know that your word will be powerful.'

'I do not desire the death of Bernardo,' said Savonarola colouring deeply. 'It would be enough if he were sent out of the city.'

'Then why do you not speak to save an old man of seventy-five from dying a death of ignominy - to give him at least the fair chances of the law?' burst out Romola, the impetuosity of her nature so roused that she forgot everything but her indignation. 'It is not that you feel bound to be neutral; else why did you speak for Lorenzo Tornabuoni? You spoke for him because he is more friendly to San Marco; my godfather feigns no friendship. It is not, then, as a Medicean that my godfather is to die; it is as a man you have no love for! '

When Romola paused, with cheeks glowing, and with quivering lips, there was dead silence. As she saw Fra Girolamo standing motionless before her, she seemed to herself to be hearing her own words over again; words that in this echo of consciousness were in strange, painful dissonance with the memories that made part of his presence to her. The moments of silence were expanded by gathering compunction and self-doubt. She had committed sacrilege in her passion. And even the sense that she could retract nothing of her plea, that her mind could not submit itself to Savonarola's negative, made it the more needful to her to satisfy those reverential memories. With a sudden movement towards him she said -

'Forgive me, father; it is pain to me to have spoken those words - yet I cannot help speaking. I am little and feeble compared with you; you brought me light and strength. But I submitted because I felt the proffered strength - because I saw the light. Now I cannot see it. Father, you yourself declare that there comes a moment when the soul must have no guide but the voice within it, to tell whether the consecrated thing has sacred virtue. And therefore I must speak.'

Savonarola had that readily-roused resentment towards opposition, hardly separable from a power-loving and powerful nature, accustomed to seek great ends that cast a reflected grandeur on the means by which they are sought. His sermons have much of that red flame in them. And if he had been a meaner man his susceptibility might have shown itself in irritation at Romola's accusatory freedom, which was in strong contrast with the deference he habitually received from his disciples. But at this moment such feelings were nullified by that hard struggle which made half the tragedy of his life - the struggle of a mind possessed by a never-silent hunger after purity and simplicity, yet caught in a tangle of egoistic demands, false ideas, and difficult outward conditions, that made simplicity impossible. Keenly alive to all the suggestions of Romola's remonstrating words, he was rapidly surveying, as he had done before, the courses of action that were open to him, and their probable results. But it was a question on which arguments could seem decisive only in proportion as they were charged with feeling, and he had received no impulse that could alter his bias. He looked at Romola, and said -

'You have full pardon for your frankness, my daughter. You speak, I know, out of the fulness of your family affections. But these affections must give way to the needs of the Republic. If those men who have a close acquaintance with the affairs of the State believe, as I understand they do, that the public safety requires the extreme punishment of the law to fall on the five conspirators, I cannot control their opinion, seeing that I stand aloof from such affairs.'

'Then you desire that they should die? You desire that the Appeal should be denied them?' said Romola, feeling anew repelled by a vindication which seemed to her to have the nature of a subterfuge.

'I have said that I do not desire their death.'

'Then,' said Romola, her indignation rising again, 'you can be indifferent that Florentines should inflict death which you do not desire, when you might have protested against it - when you might have helped to hinder it, by urging the observance of a law which you held it good to get passed. Father, you used not to stand aloof: you used not to shrink from protesting. Do not say you cannot protest where the lives of men are concerned; say rather, you desire their death. Say rather, you hold it good for Florence that there shall be more blood and more hatred. Will the death of five Mediceans put an end to parties in Florence? Will the death of a noble old man like Bernardo del Nero save a city that holds such men as Dolfo Spini?'

'My daughter, it is enough. The cause of freedom, which is the cause of God's kingdom upon earth, is often most injured by the enemies who carry within them the power of certain human virtues. The wickedest man is often not the most insurmountable obstacle to the triumph of good.'

'Then why do you say again, that you do not desire my godfather's death?' said Romola, in mingled anger and despair. 'Rather, you hold it the more needful he should die because he is the better man. I cannot unravel your thoughts, father; I cannot hear the real voice of your judgment and conscience.'

There was a moment's pause. Then Savonarola said, with keener emotion than he had yet shown -

'Be thankful, my daughter, if your own soul has been spared perplexity; and judge not those to whom a harder lot has been given. You see one ground of action in this matter. I see many. I have to choose that which will further the work intrusted to me. The end I seek is one to which minor respects must be sacrificed. The death of five men - were they less guilty than these - is a light matter weighed against the withstanding of the vicious tyrannies which stifle the life of

Italy, and foster the corruption of the Church; a light matter weighed against the furthering of God's kingdom upon earth, the end for which I live and am willing myself to die.'

Under any other circumstances, Romola would have been sensitive to the appeal at the beginning of Savonarola's speech; but at this moment she was so utterly in antagonism with him, that what he called perplexity seemed to her sophistry and doubleness; and as he went on, his words only fed that flame of indignation, which now again, more fully than ever before, lit up the memory of all his mistakes, and made her trust in him seem to have been a purblind delusion. She spoke almost with bitterness.

'Do you, then, know so well what will further the coming of God's kingdom, father, that you will dare to despise the plea of mercy - of justice - of faithfulness to your own teaching? Has the French king, then, brought renovation to Italy? Take care, father, lest your enemies have some reason when they say, that in your visions of what will further God's kingdom you see only what will strengthen your own party.'

'And that is true!' said Savonarola, with flashing eyes. Romola's voice had seemed to him in that moment the voice of his enemies. 'The cause of my party is the cause of God's kingdom.'

'I do not believe it!' said Romola, her whole frame shaken with passionate repugnance. 'God's kingdom is something wider - else, let me stand outside it with the beings that I love.'

The two faces were lit up, each with an opposite emotion, each with an opposite certitude. Further words were impossible. Romola hastily covered her head and went out in silence.